

# Europe on-screen

## Cinema and the teaching of history

by Dominique Chansel

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The **Council of Europe** was founded in 1949 to achieve greater unity between European parliamentary democracies. It is the oldest of the European political institutions and has 41 member states,<sup>1</sup> including the 15 members of the European Union. It is the widest intergovernmental and interparliamentary organisation in Europe, and has its headquarters in Strasbourg.

With only questions relating to national defence excluded from the Council of Europe's work, the Organisation has activities in the following areas: democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms; media and communication; social and economic affairs; education, culture, heritage and sport; youth; health; environment and regional planning; local democracy; and legal co-operation.

The **European Cultural Convention** was opened for signature in 1954. This international treaty is also open to European countries that are not members of the Council of Europe, and enables them to take part in the Council's programmes on education, culture, sport and youth. So far, 47 states have acceded to the European Cultural Convention: the Council of Europe's full member states plus Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See and Monaco.

The **Council for Cultural Co-operation** (CDCC) is responsible for the Council of Europe's work on education and culture. Four specialised committees – the Education Committee, the Higher Education and Research Committee, the Culture Committee and the Cultural Heritage Committee help the CDCC to carry out its tasks under the European Cultural Convention. There is also a close working relationship between the CDCC and the standing conferences of specialised European ministers responsible for education, culture and the cultural heritage.

The CDCC's programmes are an integral part of the Council of Europe's work and, like the programmes in other sectors, they contribute to the Organisation's three main policy objectives:

- the protection, reinforcement and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms and pluralist democracy;
- the promotion of an awareness of European identity;
- the search for common responses to the great challenges facing European society.

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1. Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

The CDCC's education programme covers school and higher education. At present, there are projects on education for democratic citizenship, history, modern languages, school links and exchanges, educational policies, training for educational staff, the reform of legislation on higher education in central and eastern Europe, the recognition of qualifications, lifelong learning for equity and social cohesion, European studies for democratic citizenship, and the social sciences and the challenge of transition.

*It is a universal phenomenon that whether one is at Harvard or at Oxford or at the University of Bologna, after the dutiful striking of attitudes on subjects of professional interest ... the ice does not break until someone mentions the movies.*

*Suddenly, everyone is alert and adept... Movies are the lingua franca of the twentieth century. The Tenth Muse, as they call the movies in Italy, has driven the other nine right off Olympus – or off the peak, anyway.*

Gore Vidal in *Screening history*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 2



## Foreword

*Europe on-screen* was produced as part of the Council of Europe's history project "Learning and teaching about the history of Europe in the 20th century". The principal aims of this project are to:

- interest the young in the recent events of our continent and help establish links between historical roots and the challenges facing Europe today;
- help the young to identify with a greater Europe;
- teach the young to develop key skills of critical investigation;
- stress the importance of understanding the viewpoint of the "other";
- encourage teachers to introduce a wider European dimension into the classroom.

"Learning and teaching about the history of Europe in the 20th century" is a product-oriented project which has produced teaching material designed for secondary school teachers, textbook authors and curriculum developers (see p. 217). The project has also exploited the vast range of sources available on the 20th century. Some of these sources, in particular cinema and television, have undermined or at least "perturbed" the traditional role of the school in the transmission of history. National cinema industries under all regimes have exploited cinema for political purposes. Thus the importance of developing a critical and discerning approach to movie-going, an occupation that for many will last a lifetime.

In addition, European cinema, practically all cinema, is a rich and complex source of information on its societies and peoples. It reveals the plight of individuals on the periphery of society, highlights social injustice and gives a voice to minority viewpoints. In the case of some of the film-makers in the former Soviet bloc countries, cinema was courageously used to illustrate the alienation and repression of totalitarian societies, once the censors had been duped, often by a subversive use of humour.

*Europe on-screen* contains fact sheets on 50 films, illustrating 4 of the project's themes – nationalism, women, immigration and human rights. For many, the study will necessarily be incomplete because this or that favourite "committed" director has been left out; others will wonder how this or that director or film could have been included. These divergent and heated viewpoints will only attest to the theme of this book's epigraph, namely that cinema has become the *lingua franca* of the 20th century and everybody has very definite opinions on it.

Clearly all of the films in this study cannot be obtained throughout the CDCC's 47 member states. It is more than likely that in some areas hardly any of these films can be obtained, much less subtitled or even dubbed in the language of the country. But it is our hope that until there is a true pan-European distribution of

this continent's cinematic heritage, teachers will be inspired and guided by this study to strike out on their own and apply it to their national cinema.

The author, Dominique Chansel, is a fully qualified teacher of history and geography and has been teaching art history classes since 1998. He has university diplomas in history, the history of art and archaeology, Latin and Greek and cinema studies. He taught in the cinema department of the Université des Sciences Humaines, in Strasbourg from 1992-1997.

The postage stamps on the cover were designed by the French painter, Jean Le Gac. As in his paintings, he has mixed images, text, objects and modern reproduction techniques in these stamps, commissioned by the French National Postal Authorities, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of cinema in 1995.



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## Introduction

This project is a result of my experiences as a viewer of films and television and a teacher of history and geography. It does not propose brand-new forms of historical criticism; nor does it represent a milestone in film interpretation. However, by combining these two methods of analysing the world around us, I believe it will help many teachers by providing some useful guidelines and setting down a few markers that are necessary if films are to be used more effectively as an educational tool.

The use of illustrative examples will, I hope, help to promote a love of the cinema and images, together with clear-sighted criticism of them, among the young.

In secondary education, the stunning success of the video recorder, aided by the authorities' obsession with "new technologies", has led to a huge increase in the use of film in all subjects, particularly history and geography. Video recorders are not only much easier to use than the old 16 mm projectors that schools used to own, but access to films, which used to be limited, complicated and expensive, has been increased considerably by the possibility of recording the huge variety of documentaries and fictional programmes shown on television, as well as by the numerous video cassettes which can be purchased or hired from all kinds of commercial outlets.

To quote Marc Nicolas, of the French National Centre for Cinema (*Centre national du cinéma français*), "We have never had access to so many films, especially old films. Video ... cable ... and satellite ... have completely changed our relationship with films in a single generation, multiplying provision ten-fold. One third of the 30 million cassettes sold last year were films more than 10 years old".<sup>1</sup>

What about the tricky legal and economic issue of rights to show individual films in educational establishments. Whether in primary schools or universities, teachers who wish to use films in their lessons are faced with a major institutional problem: copyright regulations often mean it is illegal to show a particular film.

No one respects authors' rights more than teachers, who understand perfectly well the arguments of associations that defend professional copyright. However, until a true partnership is created between the national education authorities and the various film and television bodies, and in particular until the European institutions manage to regulate co-operation between the commercial sector and the different European education systems – including the least well-off – we need to remember the following simple points:

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1. *Le Monde*, 25 October 1998.

- the widespread use of video equipment in schools has led to the “illegal” showing of films and excerpts from film or television programmes, which it would be totally hypocritical to deny;
- the young cannot be given the moving image education they need if schools are not allowed to show them films. In the long term, such education can only benefit the film and television industry as a whole, since it is aimed at its future customers;
- viewing, analysing and commenting on a short extract does not put students off a film, but makes them want to see it in its entirety. Why else are our TVscreens so full of clips and trailers of the latest films? Most films shown in history lessons are old, often black and white and sometimes silent – who could seriously claim that large numbers of teenagers, targeted by incessant media hype over the latest releases and under pressure to conform with modern trends, would discover these films to any great extent under their own steam?
- teachers who show films, although they may be breaking the law, are not seeking financial gain; on the contrary, they often have to spend a lot of money buying their own materials, video tapes or the latest equipment, not to mention the time they invest in training in new technologies and preparing these innovative lessons.

At the same time, however, serious doubt has been cast on whether films are genuinely used for educational purposes by schools as part of a proper moving-image education. Until recently, many young teachers would arrive in the classroom with no real training in film analysis or, more specifically, criticism of film or television archive material. Paradoxically, a gap seems to have opened up between the spectacular progress of historical research on this type of material, initiated in France by the pioneering studies of Marc Ferro and reflected in the major works of Jean-Pierre Bertin-Magit, Christian Delage and Antoine de Baecque, and the generally routine and conventional ways in which it was used in the classroom. Whereas, over the last 20 years, the priority given to methods of critical analysis has led to innovative educational practices being developed around the use of written documents (texts, statistics, archaeological or iconographic documents), film, whether in the form of edited archives, original documentaries or fiction, usually remains, at best, a partial illustration of or, at worst, a poor substitute for a traditional lesson!

This study therefore aims to make teachers and, through them, students more aware of a specific type of 20th century historical record of European society – that of moving images.

Cinema could be described as an instant portrayal of the main issues that concern the society in which it develops (issues that are moulded and shaped by the main political, economic and ideological forces of the time). This phenomenon occurs in two ways. Firstly, cinema appears to reproduce and reflect a certain vision of the world, with the many different types of behaviour, customs, hier-

archies and values that characterise a society. Secondly, in “showing” the world and a particular society, cinema aims to create a specific point of view among its audience. This is obvious in militant films (whose purpose is to denounce a particular aspect or even the whole of a specific social, political or cultural system) and in propaganda films commissioned by a particular authority (which, on the contrary, are attempting to justify a system already in place or being established). However, it is also true of so-called “entertainment” or “artistic” films which, although they do not openly defend the social, political or cultural system in which they are set, may nevertheless appear to accept or even justify it more or less indirectly. In some cases, directors or production teams may even try to get round dominant codes and taboos, or even censorship itself, by showing attentive viewers ways of abandoning the official line and alternatives to limp acceptance of indoctrination, a tragic surrendering of the spirit.

In any case, cinema has a multi-faceted and complex relationship with society, of which it is an active part. Students can learn a great deal by analysing this relationship. We are convinced, since we have often observed it in schools, that a thorough and enthusiastic approach to analysis of an excerpt or of a whole film does not destroy an essential aspect of teenagers’ relationship with films as a source of interest and motivation: the pleasure of viewing, heightened by the joys of deciphering a film.



# **I. NATIONALISM**





## Nationalism in conflict: the Great War

### The end of St Petersburg (Konets Sankt-Peterburga) by Vsevolod Pudovkin

*Soviet Union, 1927, B/W, silent*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – Soviet revolution*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953) was one of the greatest film directors of the Golden Age of Soviet cinema in the 1920s. He was no stranger to the trials and tribulations of history – he was called up, wounded and taken prisoner during the first world war before being drawn to the cinema. He started working in Kuleshov’s workshop in Moscow in 1920. He developed theories on the art of silent films, and his ideas on editing, close-ups and slow motion, which he put into practice in several films (*Mother*, 1925 – *The end of St Petersburg*, 1927 – *Storm over Asia*, 1928), made him one of the undisputed pioneers of silent films. In the 1930s, subjected first to the new demands of sound films and then to the strict instructions of “social realism”, he gradually became an official film-maker, and his later works are all too often mere illustrations of the regime’s propaganda (*Vasili’s return*, 1953).

**The context** in which the film was produced is of capital importance. The film was prepared and shot in 1927 as one of the major events organised to commemorate the October Revolution of 1917. It was the duty of the Mezhrabpom, the state nationalised film studio, to make a special effort on this occasion: its two greatest projects were entrusted to two young, enthusiastic film-makers who bubbled over with new theories – Eisenstein and Pudovkin. There was strong competition between the two crews, which often shot footage at the same historical sites just a few days apart, with the same extras, volunteer workers or soldiers lent by the Red Army. Pudovkin managed to finish *The end of St Petersburg* by the autumn of 1927. Eisenstein’s *October* (*Ten days that shook the world*) was not released until spring, 1928.

It is worth mentioning that Pudovkin’s decision to concentrate on anonymous characters with modest backgrounds turned out to be a wise one. Eisenstein, who had wanted to feature the main historical figures of 1917, found himself clashing with the Communist Party leaders of 1927. This resulted in Trotsky’s being portrayed as an undesirable character!

Long overshadowed by the prestige of Eisenstein's work, the film is now recognised as one of the masterpieces of Soviet cinema in the 1920s.

**The screenplay.** At first, the plan was that the film should cover all St Petersburg's recent past, but Pudovkin and scriptwriter Nathan Zarkhi realised that this was over-ambitious and decided to focus the action on a simple story: an uprooted peasant, swept along in the great turmoil of history, first the Great War and then the revolution, becomes aware of his condition and the role he is to play. Although the characters created in the screenplay are mainly symbolic (the illiterate, uprooted peasant; the more lucid worker; the dedicated militant), the skilled direction imbues them with the true depth of real people captured in the privacy of their daily lives.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** An ordinary scene of the rural exodus in Russia at the beginning of the century: a young man leaves his village to find work in the town. In order to survive, he becomes a strike-breaker. In his ignorance, he even goes so far as to inform the management of the names of the strike leaders. The police arrest the ringleaders, one of whom is a friend of the young man from the same village who generously welcomed him into his own home. Outraged by such injustice, the young peasant revolts violently and is thrown into prison.

When the world war breaks out, the young man is sent to the front in the midst of nationalist enthusiasm. The terrible reality of the war and contact with militant Bolsheviks open his eyes further. He is now ready to become a soldier of the revolution: he takes part in the mutiny of February 1917 before joining the troops that attack the Winter Palace in October.

**Choices and perspective.** Made in the context of the celebrations marking the anniversary of the October Revolution, the film is obviously an official propaganda tool of the regime and should be considered as such, although this does not detract in any way from its aesthetic quality and narrative strength.

The central argument of the film is based on the Leninist reading of the first world war (an opportunity for revolution). However, Pudovkin's work veers away from the views of other film-makers of the time, such as Eisenstein, whose works put collective action and the struggle of the masses to the fore, paying little attention to the fates of individuals. However much revolutionary didactic value may be lost in Pudovkin's film, by focusing on the life of a young peasant, his mistakes, suffering and growing awareness, it gains in humanity and genuine feeling.

### *Analysis of two sequences illustrating the general themes*

1. *Nationalist hysteria artificially fuelled when war is declared*
  - Identify those images and shots which best characterise the director's portrayal of popular "enthusiasm".

- Compare them with well-known accounts of mobilisation in Germany and France, for example.
- It is interesting to note that Pudovkin’s splendid images have often been used, without being credited, in European documentaries claiming to be edited purely from archives! What sort of manipulation is attempted and what effect is created in these documentaries supposedly based on “authentic footage”?

2. *The sequence which uses cross-cutting techniques to contrast, in staggering fashion, the unfortunate Russian foot soldiers’ assault on the German machine guns with the fluctuations of speculation on the stock market.*

- What cinematographic process is used to draw this parallel? The cinematic process is used to demonstrate an ideology: what effect is being sought?
- What, precisely, are the various elements being compared?
- What vision of war is given by this comparison? In what ways does it contrast with usual portrayals of patriotism?
- What trend of political thinking is popularised by the cinema? Is this thinking confined to the Soviet Union of the 1920s?
- What relation can be established between this sequence and these two famous remarks by the French socialist Jean Jaurès (assassinated in July 1914): “Capitalism carries war as clouds carry lightning”, “We think we die for our homeland, but we die for industrialists”? Explain your answer.

This work may be done collectively in class, given to a tutorial group or done as homework. Help should be given in the form of specific questions to focus students’ attention on the relevant points.



### **Westfront 1918 – Comrades of 1918 (Westfront 1918 – Vier von der Infanterie) by Georg Wilhelm Pabst**

*Germany, Nero-Film, 1930, B/W*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – relations between men and women*

#### **A. Background to the film**

**The director.** Georg Wilhelm Pabst (1885-1967) is one of the greatest German film-makers and his career is emblematic of the history of German cinema. From his early expressionist days with *The treasure (Der Schatz)* in 1923 to the major international productions of the 1930s, such as *The mistress of Atlantis (Die Herrin von Atlantis – 1932)*; from *Kammerspiel* (chamber theatre), with *The joyless street (Freudlose Gasse)*, to the timid revival of German post-war cinema with *Jackboot mutiny (Es geschah am 20. Juli)*, Pabst dealt with many themes and tried several styles. He also proved to have a good eye for new talent, discovering Greta Garbo, Brigitte Helm, Louise Brooks and others.

At the beginning of the 1930s, which were marked by an upsurge in political and social conflicts, his films testify to a greater commitment, lying between social parables (*The threepenny opera – Die Dreigroschenoper – based on the play by Bertolt Brecht*) and the humanitarian idealism of which *Comrades of 1918* and *Comradeship* are good examples.

**The screenplay.** Written by Laszlo Vajda and Peter Martin Lampel, the screenplay was largely faithful to Ernst Johansen's novel. There is no plot as such; rather there is a series of ordeals that four young Germans, comrades in arms, go through somewhere on the western front.

**The context at the time of release.** European and American cinema production in the early 1930s was marked by a large number of films on the Great War of 1914-18: Lewis Milestones' *All quiet on the western front*, *No man's land* by Victor Trivas and Howard Hawks' *The dawn patrol*. Attempts have often been made to link this phenomenon with the development of talking films (see the fact sheet on *The wooden crosses*). But the deterioration in the international political and social climate, due to the terrible economic recession and the new worries and tensions born out of it, should also be underlined. The spectre of war was once again looming.

However, before 1933, nazism had yet to triumph in Germany; the “spirit of Geneva” still pervaded attempts at dialogue in Europe and many members of war veterans’ associations were resolutely pacifist.

As a result, all the war films made in this period have a pacifist flavour, uncompromisingly showing the suffering of small groups of individuals swept up in a turmoil of killing. These “humanist” films no longer depict adversaries as objects of hatred, but as human beings who go through ordeals together and are therefore worthy of understanding.

On the other hand, Hitler’s rise to power was to see the return in strength of nationalistic and militaristic films: *Red dawn* (*Morgenrot*, 1933) by Gustav Ucicky, a film to the glory of a submarine crew showers praise upon military valour and justifies war, and Hans Zoberlein’s film *Shock troop* (*Stoßtrup 1917*), 1933, makes a plea for nationalism and exalts the necessary sacrifice of the individual for the good of the national community.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** The scene is set on the front somewhere in France, in a war that is dragging on. The fates of four German soldiers – Karl, a young student, the sturdy Bavarian Hans and a lieutenant – are mingled in the great upheaval caused by the war. Moments of fear, shelling and extreme violence and assaults in the trenches alternate with the boredom of everyday life, whose hardships, problems and misery are shown in a cold, uncompromising light.

There are some moments of happiness, or illusion: young women come to the rest quarters, romances begin to form ... Hans courts a pretty Frenchwoman called Yvette.

Karl is happy to go on leave, but his return home is demoralising: he becomes aware of the rift between his experience at the front and the nationalistic brainwashing that goes on behind the lines; soldiers’ reunions with their sweethearts can be unexpectedly traumatic.

The ordeals faced by the four comrades end in death or madness.

**Choices and perspective.** The choices made in the direction of the film stem from the principles of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity movement), of which Pabst was known to see himself as the main proponent in the cinema at the time. The aim of the movement was to see the world and society in as realistic and objective a light as possible. This aesthetic and ideological principle explains the director’s quasi-documentary choices, particularly gripping in the unforgettable combat sequences. Although the film expresses a German view of the conflict, its deliberately realistic approach, with no hint of vainglorious patriotism or excessive pathos, emphasises the horror and pointlessness of war.

In so doing, it opposes the idealised picture of military honour and warlike virtues that the nazi movement used as an ideological weapon at the beginning of the 1930s.

### *Analysis of the portrayals*

1. *The intensity of the fighting.* The violence of war is particularly imposing in *Comrades of 1918*. The audience is often plunged into a nightmare universe of documentary-like realism. A number of the cinematographic techniques used to achieve this realism can be identified (frequent close-ups, cut off at ground or eye level, give the viewer the stifling impression of being in the trenches).

2. *Particularly strong scenes.* The death of the student, the lieutenant's madness. The devices used to achieve these portrayals can be analysed: the choice of location (types of scenery) and points in time, the manipulation of time (real or elliptical time), the main framing used, the acting, and so forth.

3. *The depiction of the enemy.* Identify shots and sequences showing the allied soldiers and make a detailed analysis of the elements used. Pay special attention to the final sequence in the film, where Karl lies dying in a hospital bed. What is the nationality of the wounded man in the next bed? What gestures and words does the director highlight? How does he express the full humanist message of the film?

4. *Relations with life behind the lines.* The sequence of Karl's leave, in particular, should be analysed. How is the growing lack of understanding between civilians and soldiers returning from the front conveyed? Which social groups in particular are denounced for their stupidity and selfishness? How does the director go about ridiculing their patriotic prattling? On the other hand, the suffering of the rest of the population is clearly shown: food rationing and queues. In what way is this documentary touch used to add dramatic effect to the fictional narrative?

5. *The personal drama: the soldier and his wife.* What is the situation? Is it totally unexpected and, if so, why? How does the director manage to avoid the usual clichés and yet surprise the viewer? Can the ending of this scene be guessed right from the beginning? How do the protagonists' reactions develop, and why? Why is the temptation of violence not only possible, but very credible?

Modern historians would say that human relationships are inevitably "brutalised" in time of war. It should be noted that very few words are spoken, but that the rigour and precision of the filming enables the viewer to follow the hesitations and speeding up of the narrative. What is the most important thing to be learned from this scene? Does it apply to the film as a whole? "There are no heroes, only victims."





## The wooden crosses (Les croix de bois) by Raymond Bernard

*France, 1931, B/W, 110 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – male/female relationships*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Raymond Bernard (1897-1977), a major French film-maker of the 1920s and 1930s, undeservedly forgotten today. He was highly successful with historical films (*Le miracle des loups*, 1924) or adaptations of great French literary works (*Les Misérables*, 1933, *Tartarin de Tarascon*, 1934). He was acutely sensitive to the theme of the 1914-18 war, to which he devoted three films differing greatly in genre and handling (the other two are *Marthe Richard au service de la France*, 1937 and *Les Otages*, 1939).

**The screenplay.** This is very faithfully adapted from one of France's most successful "war novels", *Les croix de bois* by Roland Dorgelès.

The early 1930s gave birth to a real wave of films whose setting and subject was the Great War. It is established that the development of sound film and talking film technology significantly contributed to this revival, allowing audiences to hear the crash of bombs, the rattle of machine-guns and the screams and shouts of the men. The action gained in realism and dramatic intensity from the pandemonium of battle. The film soundtrack was especially polished; the technicians availed themselves of the latest innovations for recording, with the use of multiple microphones, and for mixing, with the very first soundtrack blending.

As discussed previously, on the political and social front, the early 1930s were marked by depression and the attendant new anxieties, but in 1931 nazism had not yet triumphed in Germany, the "Geneva spirit" of the attempts at European dialogue was still alive, and most of the influential war veterans' associations were resolutely pacifist.

In the same way, all films of this period are tinged with pacifism in their uncompromising portrayal of the sufferings of small groups of individuals thrust into the deadly turmoil. In these "humanist" films, the representation of the foe is no longer charged with hatred but rather with understanding, because of the trials undergone in common.

**Reception by the public** was very good, making the film France's greatest box-office success in 1932. It seems to have appealed not only to veterans but also more widely to ordinary folk. In the months following its release the film acquired virtually official status; the then President of the Republic was reportedly moved to tears, but above all it was frequently shown to schoolchildren. Now, though, it is a comparatively little-known film, rarely broadcast in France on general interest channels.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** By depicting the daily tribulations of an infantry section in the major offensives of 1915-16 in Champagne, Raymond Bernard gives a true-to-life presentation of the violence of the fighting and also of the soldiers' suffering and endurance. The section, a microcosm of French society in which the student Demachy rubs shoulders with the factory worker Sulphart, the pastry cook Breval and many others, faces extreme situations where comradeship and courage are crucial to survival.

**Choices and perspective.** Raymond Bernard seeks primarily to furnish a documentary vision of war: this realistic intent is calculated to impress on the viewer, without undue pathos, the horror of the slaughter that is modern warfare.

The film appears to reflect with fair accuracy not the attitudes of 1915 but a certain state of mind among veterans in the early 1930s, a complex mixture of memories recalling the trials they lived through but also the funny interludes and the moments of brotherhood between men from all backgrounds. There is a remarkable freedom from hatred of the enemy. Clear allusions are also made to the gulf between the men in the ranks and the General Staff, as well as to the painful break with the "Rear" and especially with beloved women. There is no jingoistic vainglory whatsoever but a certain pride in having endured with one's comrades.

A soldier tells another who asks whether the battle ended in victory, "It's a victory, because I'm alive".

*Analysis of a representation at each appearance in the film: perception of the enemy*

Within the general theme, one should concentrate on studying how the German foe is portrayed in the film. The method is straightforward: as the film unfolds, note the incidents where the enemy is visible but also those where he is merely alluded to by the French soldiers.

This work can be carried out collectively in class, or assigned to a group as a supervised activity, or done as homework. It will be aided by a questionnaire directing the students' attention to specific points.

*Incident 1: the night patrol sequence*

1. How and in what circumstances does the young French soldier meet the enemy for the first time? Does he see and is he seen by the enemy?
2. Give a precise description of the camera shot of the German soldier; could the producer have done without it? Explain your answer.
3. How does the French soldier react? What emotion does the producer make him convey? What thought(s) might occur to the viewer?

*Incident 2: the attack*

1. When, and in what circumstances, are we shown the Germans as they try to resist the French attack? Did they hold out for long? Bravely or not? How does the filming technique demonstrate this?
2. Describe and comment on the reactions of the French soldiers when the prisoners come out.

*Incident 3: the water-carrying fatigue*

1. Why is the image of the German sniper so negative? Where is he positioned? What is his job?
2. Would this German soldier really have been visible to the French side? What do these camera shots of him add to the dramatisation of the story?

*Incident 4: the soldier's dying moments*

1. Death scene: in what way is it filmed? What are the last “mental pictures” created for the dying man by the cross fade technique?
2. What is noticeable in the parade of “wooden crosses”?
3. At whom and what could these images arouse the viewer's anger? For whom and what could they make him feel pity?

**Summing-up.** Recapitulate all the above observations to pick out the main threads.

*External criticism of this representation by collation with other documents*

- What are its possible strong contrasts with the jingoistic stereotypes of the wartime French press? (Review incident 2, for example: do the German soldiers surrender easily, and in what condition? Comparison with misleading press reports.)
- How might it reflect the complex feelings experienced by the French soldiers and attested by the profuse documents concerning the state of mind of the “poilus” (letters, trench newspapers ...)?

- Is it possible, and if so how, to relate this representation to the pacifist attitude of many veterans in the early 1930s? (Review the death scene: what image of the German soldier is finally retained by the viewer?).

## Many wars ago (Uomini contro) by Francesco Rosi

*Italy, 1970, Colour, 105 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – social relations – antimilitarism*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Francesco Rosi (born in Naples in 1922) is one of the greatest names in Italian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. He began his career as assistant to Visconti and then Ettore Gianini. His first film, *La sfida* (*The challenge*), won an award at the Venice Film Festival in 1958. The works that followed, *Salvatore Giuliano* and *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands over the city*), earned him a deserved reputation as a “political” film-maker, in the positive sense of the word, of the neo-realist school.

After *Many wars ago*, Rosi made a series of great films, which combine enthralling stories with extremely well-documented, rigorous socio-political investigations, such as *The Mattei affair* (*Il caso Mattei*) and *Illustrious corpses* (*Cadaveri eccellenti*). Above all, Rosi is an excellent observer of Italian society, lucid and unaccommodating in his denunciation of scandalous or unjust situations. He is not afraid of including messages in his films as long as they are served by high-quality, effective writing.

**The screenplay.** Written by several talented scriptwriters, including Toni Guerra and R. La Capria, it draws on the real events described in an autobiographical account, *A year on the high plateau*, by Emilio Lussu, a socialist intellectual called up by the Italian army. These dreadful, unnecessary battles took place in the Italian Alps in 1916.

**The context at the time of release and public reception of the film.** In a period when war films were produced in abundance, 1957 saw the release of Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of glory*, an exceptional work which caused a sensation and a scandal (it should not be forgotten that it was banned in France) because of both its aesthetic quality and the violence of the events portrayed. The film was followed in the 1960s by a new spate of films set during the first world war. But they are a far cry from the pacifistic intentions of the films of the 1930s, which were generally content to depict the horror of war. These new films were violently antimilitarist, denouncing the bloodthirsty stupidity of butcher generals and expressing fury over the crushing of individual consciences and the ruina-

tion of the human condition caught up in the pitiless machinery of “History with a capital H”. In so doing, these films bring aspects of the war that had long been glossed over in official histories back into the open: desertion, confrontation between the soldiers and the hierarchy, the mutinies of 1917 and the difficult relations between the soldiers at the front and the people behind the lines.

These new approaches correspond to the new political sympathies of the anti-establishment youth that grew up after the events of 1968. New radical trends appeared in Italy as they did everywhere in Europe, denouncing the violence of war and the deceitful use of the traditional values of authority and patriotism. Francesco Rosi clearly belongs to this vast movement of political denunciation. When Rosi said that he wanted to link the meaning of the war of 50 years previously to the wars that were being waged at the time, he was thinking of, among others, the war in Vietnam.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** In the tortured landscape of the Alps, an Italian division engages in an uncertain battle with Austrian troops to take control of Monte Fior, an operational base. The mountain top, lost, retaken and lost again, becomes the symbol of an absurd struggle.

General Leone, who commands the Italian division, is ambitious, inhuman and full of scorn for the rank and file. He treats his troops haughtily and demands huge sacrifices of them in order to regain possession of the summit.

At first, the soldiers are obedient and passive but, shocked by the unnecessary butchery and cruelty of their general, they gradually become aware of the pointlessness of their dedication and the official lies. Mutinies break out, but they are severely repressed and the soldiers put before the firing squad as an example.

Two lieutenants, Sassu and Ottolenghi, are witness to this spiral of events. Sassu is an idealist who believes in his duty and the homeland: he is convinced that he is fighting for a just cause that makes sacrifices necessary. Ottolenghi, an anarchist and sceptic, is ready to seize the opportunity to destroy a society that he rejects. Despite their opposing ideas, the two comrades respect each other. Caught up in the tide of events, they both fall victim to it.

**Choices and perspective.** The film deliberately takes the side of “the lowly people”, dragged unwillingly into the turmoil of a war that was not their own. In the wake of what became known as “the creeping May” in Italy, it is a political analysis of hierarchical relations, a virulent denunciation of the manipulation conducted and crimes committed in the name of the state. The mutinies and desertions are put back into context and seen as desperate collective or individual responses to unbearable situations.

*Analysis of three sequences*1. *The assault in the scree and its bloody failure*

- What is the vanguard’s mission? (These soldiers have no weapons, only tools: what are they?) What derisory measures have been taken to protect them? (The use of this “armour” is not an invention: it did indeed lead to a number of unfortunate experiences.) How does this add a note of ridicule to a tragic situation? What historical allusion is made by the general? Comment on it. What is the vanguard’s fate?
- Why, in spite of everything, is the general assault ordered? Analyse the visual clues and give possible explanations for the reactions of the various officers and soldiers shown. How can this bloody failure be explained?
- Describe and comment in detail on the attitude of the Austrian soldiers in the face of the attack by the Italian troops. What leads them to expect this attack? Is it plausible, and, if so, why? Try to find accounts of similar cases, fraternising for example, in other documentary sources.
- How does General Leone react to the carnage? How does the director make his reaction particularly detestable?
- Give an explanation of Lieutenant Ottolenghi’s intervention: what is he trying to achieve and what effect does it have?

2. *Attempts at desertion or self-mutilation.* Analyse the different situations depicted in order to define the various means the soldiers use to escape from the war. Are the soldiers successful? In what light are the soldiers being questioned shown? How does the military hierarchy “respond” to these acts? Describe the subterfuge employed by the soldiers in their attempt at desertion and the different reactions of their commanding officers, comrades and Austrian “enemies”.

3. *The mutinies.* In the form of a table, compare the causes, events and outcome of the mutinies as shown in the film with historians’ accounts of genuine mutinies (the mutinies of 1917 in France or those of Russian troops, for example). The aim here is to get students to compare different documents in order to produce a well-argued critique of cinematographic representation.

**Summary.** Go over all the observations made above and bring out the key ideas. What is the film saying? In the light of this, who are the Italian soldiers’ real enemies? Which stream of political thought do these ideas belong to?





## King and country by Joseph Losey

*Great Britain, 1964, B/W, 92 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – the human condition*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Joseph Losey (1909-84) is a very “European” American filmmaker. Above all a man of the theatre, influenced by Brecht, he did not direct his first film until 1943. In 1948, he made *The boy with green hair*, an antiracist fable. At the beginning of the 1950s, falling victim to McCarthy’s witch-hunt, he left Hollywood and worked in Great Britain under an assumed name until he was able to reveal his true identity. The original atmosphere with which he imbued his detective films won him recognition and the full measure of his talent became apparent in the 1960s, especially through his collaboration with Harold Pinter. This creative period, to which *King and country* belongs, is marked by masterpieces such as *The servant*, *The go-between* and *Accident*.

**The screenplay.** James Lansdale’s screenplay is faithfully adapted from a play by John Wilson which had been hugely successful in the United Kingdom. The two principal actors are tremendous: Dirk Bogarde gives an impeccable performance as Captain Hargreaves and Tom Courtnay identified completely with his role as the unhappy Private Hamp. He won the award for best male actor at the Venice Film Festival in 1964.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** 1917, the war is dragging interminably on. British soldiers stand about in the mud in the trenches of northern France and morale is low. In a moment of depression, Private Hamp, a simple young cobbler from the London suburbs, tries to desert. He is arrested and tried by court martial.

Captain Hargreaves, a severe but upright officer, is assigned as his defence counsel. Although at first he has no sympathy for Hamp, whom he considers a deserter, in the course of their conversations he begins to understand how the horror of an inhuman war has deeply traumatised this naïve, uncultivated young man, who joined up in 1914 to fight for “king and country”. Sincerely compassionate, but with few illusions, the captain does his utmost to obtain the court martial’s clemency.

But an order to launch a new offensive comes through: the battalion must move up to the front line and attack the next day. The soldiers are condemned to die. The military command considers that Hamp must be sentenced to death to set an example to the troops.

During the night that precedes both the assault and the execution, Hamp's comrades manage to join him in his makeshift cell: they have got their hands on some bottles of alcohol and all get drunk in a desperate drinking bout. At dawn, the prisoner is dragged, almost unconscious, to the stake. However, he does not die immediately and Captain Hargreaves, almost tenderly, gives him the *coup de grâce*.

**Choices and perspective.** Joseph Losey's stylised and highly detailed description of the horror of trench warfare is perfectly believable. Mud reins over this sordid universe of pillboxes and earthen trenches. The "trench war", where the art of warfare seems to be reduced to nothing, men suffer unendingly in the mud and die in order to take a few yards of land, which they then lose again, becomes the best illustration of the absurdity of all wars.

The first world war, more than the second, in which the ideological stakes were at least as important as nationalist confrontations, becomes an archetype, a symbol of all the crass war adventures that film-makers sympathetic to the cause of pacifism in the 1960s set out to denounce.

Joseph Losey, a humanist film-maker and meticulous observer of the conflicts between the social classes and their difficulty in communicating with one another, is not content with denouncing the absurdity of war. He strips down the machinery of social and cultural alienation that makes war possible by causing individuals to accept it, either enthusiastically or with resignation.

**Analysis of some of the film's themes.** *King and country* is an austere, harsh film that makes no concessions. What is more, the questions it raises concerning the relationship between human beings and suffering, the violence of war, courage and cowardice and relations between the classes can lead to a genuine philosophical questioning of the human condition. Teachers should therefore reserve this film for sixth-form students.

In this context, students could be asked to conduct research in a number of areas.

1. *The horror of the conditions for survival in the trenches.* The film was adapted from a play. The director undertook to remain faithful to a certain theatrical approach and therefore made no attempt at spectacular reconstitution. How did he recreate the universe of the trenches? By stylising it as a dark, subterranean world, a sort of Dante's inferno, and selecting particularly testing ingredients: the rain, mud, filth, and rats.

Particular attention should be paid to making a list of the scenes in which rats appear in order to study their often metaphorical significance: although the rats

are the soldiers' worst enemies, do they not also sometimes symbolise the soldiers themselves?

2. *The representation of war:* most interestingly, no fighting is shown in the film. How are the violence and inhumanity of the conflict suggested? Solely through Hamp's accounts. Yet this unhappy soldier is unskilled in the use of language; he expresses himself badly, in snippets, without pathos. It is therefore all the more important that his statements to his defence counsel and the court martial should be analysed. Students could make an inventory, in chronological order or by thematic groups, of the information he gives. For example, the accounts of the death of Hamp's friend, blown to pieces by a shell, and of his own fall into a shell-hole, where he was buried under earth. They gradually form a picture of a terrible war as perceived and experienced by a simple man swept up in spite of himself in drama beyond his understanding.

3. *The two main protagonists, Private Hamp and Captain Hargreaves.* An analysis should be made of all the fundamental points that set them apart: the officer's "upper-class background", his education, the ease with which he expresses himself, his awareness of situations, his capacity for conceptualisation and abstract thought; but also of what ends up by drawing them closer to each other in spite of everything.

4. *On the basis of these preliminary studies,* a deeper examination, which the film encourages us to carry out, could be made of the influence of socio-cultural criteria on individual conduct, on human beings' responsibility for their acts and on heroism (delinquency in the context of a warlike ideology?) and cowardice (legitimate survival instinct?).

This work could be done as a class, as a group project, in a tutorial or as homework. Students should be given assistance in the form of questions to focus their attention on the relevant aspects.

**Summary.** Use all the comments given above to summarise the key ideas.

**Write a critique of these depictions** by relating them to other documents.



**Black and white in colour (Noirs et blancs en couleur, originally entitled *La victoire en chantant*)  
by Jean-Jacques Annaud**

*France, 1976, colour, 95 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – colonisation*

**A. Background to the film**

**The director.** Jean-Jacques Annaud was born in Draveil, in the suburbs of Paris, in 1943. After completing his cinematographic studies at the French Institute of Higher Cinematographic Studies, he began working in advertising, where he gained a reputation as a director. Since his first full-length feature, *Black and white in colour*, in 1976, Jean-Jacques Annaud has led a remarkable career in the cinema, constantly questioning his work by dealing with new subjects and taking new risks. He owes much of his international success to his taste for historical reconstitution in films such as *Quest for fire (La guerre du feu)*, 1981; *The name of the rose (Le nom de la rose)*, 1986, based on the novel by Umberto Eco; and *Seven years in Tibet*, 1997.

**The screenplay** was written by Annaud in collaboration with Georges Conchon, author of *L'Etat sauvage (The savage state)*, a novel criticising the negative aspects of the French colonisation of Africa and the abuse perpetrated. On the director's recommendation, the film was constructed as a series of sketches, with deliberately short scenes.

**Although favourably received by the critics**, *La victoire en chantant* did not enjoy public success on its release. The harsh description of certain national shortcomings and somewhat inglorious moments in French history may well go some way to explaining this. The producers and the director agreed to bring out a new, slightly shorter version with the new title of *Noirs et blancs en couleur (Black and white in colour)*. In its new form, it won the Oscar for the best foreign language film in 1977. Following this award, the film met with honourable success in France and Europe.

**B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** January 1915 in a forgotten outpost in French Equatorial Africa near the border with Cameroon, then a German colony. The recent declaration of war has not yet reached the handful of Europeans who live in the heart of the bush: a few stupid, greedy shopkeepers, an alcoholic sergeant in the French Colonial

Army who commands a platoon of native infantrymen, two missionaries with somewhat unconventional methods of converting the “heathen”, and a young geographer, fresh out of the Ecole Normale (teachers’ training college), who is treated as something of an outsider by the other colonialists because of his intellectual background. When news of the conflict finally arrives from France, the little colony, in a bout of patriotic fervour, decides to form a column to attack the tiny enemy border post manned by only three Germans, with whom, until then, they have been on perfectly good terms.

The expedition, badly organised, takes a disastrous turn: the natives enlisted against their will become the pitiful victims of the German machine gun.

The young geographer, whose suggestions had, until then, been scorned, takes things in hand: he proves to be a leader of men, but at the cost of betraying his humanist and pacifistic convictions.

**Choices and perspective.** With biting irony, Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *Black and white in colour* lets fly at the imperialistic confrontations between the great European powers in 1914, which turned Africa into a battlefield alongside Europe: jingoistic stupidity, delusions of being superior to the enemy, the racism of the poor white settlers who suddenly find themselves officers, the lack of concern for human life and the blundering military “strategy” are all denounced by an iconoclastic Annaud with vicious exaltation. But this satire is unfortunately based on real events. And humour and sarcasm are forbidding weapons of denunciation. Teachers will nevertheless have to be wary of the fact that almost none of the film’s dialogue is meant to be taken at face value and explain this to students: for example, the chauvinistic or racist comments made by certain characters may shock sensitive young people, or, much worse, reinforce their stereotypical views.

**Two areas of work** may be suggested: an analysis of one or two sequences in the film or a synoptic study of the whole work. The choice will obviously depend on the students’ maturity and the time available to the teacher.

1. *Analyse the opening sequence* (opening credits plus the first five minutes)
  - What documents are shown during the opening credit sequence? What period do they date from?
  - Identify and describe some of the themes conveyed by these naïve post-cards.
  - What music is used as the soundtrack for these credits? What effect does this association of sound and picture create today?
  - What are the film’s opening shots? How does the style chosen by the director – close-ups of details of uniforms – create a comical surprise effect?
  - What are the dominant components of the soundtrack (music, dialogue)? Which European country do they caricature?

- How does the effect created by the panning shot tell us that the story is taking place on French territory?

- How are European national confrontations transported onto African soil?

2. *Synoptic study: historical truth and caricature?*

*Nationalistic urges, chauvinistic feeling*

- How does the director show us the reactions of the handful of French people to the announcement that war has been declared? What elements of the patriotic propaganda of the beginning of the century are evoked?
- What failings often attributed to the French (by themselves or by other peoples) are brought out by the director?
- What images and words are used to portray the German adversary? What national prejudices can be identified?

*The dominators and the dominated in the colonial system*

- The nature and expression of attitudes of domination and racist clear conscience vary according to the group of Europeans concerned (shopkeepers, missionaries, soldiers, intellectuals, etc.): note down the information given on this subject in the various sequences of the film.
- How are the different methods of recruiting native infantrymen depicted in the film? In what ways is the method devised by the young geographer more effective, and more inflexible, than that of the sergeant?

The main characteristic of the film is the **use of humour as a means of denunciation**: students should write a critique of the portrayals in the film, relating them to other documents on the history of the period and then referring back to the film, the better to identify examples of the way in which comedy and irony are used.

**Useful documentation work.** These subjects could be worked on: the sharing out of Africa by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin and in the Treaty of Versailles; colonial propaganda in the various European countries; military operations in Africa during the first world war; the use of colonial troops (from Africa and Asia) on battlefields of the first-world-war.





## National and ideological hatred: the second world war

### Rome, open city (Roma, città aperta) by Roberto Rossellini

*Italy, 1945, B/W, 97 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – relations between men and women*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Roberto Rossellini (1906-77) is a major film-maker in the history of European cinema. He began his career at the end of the 1930s and his early films are marked by the nationalist climate of fascist Italy and by a Christian humanism which was to remain a constant throughout his work. In the poverty-stricken and ravaged Italy of the difficult post-war years, Rossellini made a series of forceful, moving films, often on a shoestring budget, which marked the beginning of the neo-realist movement. From *Rome, open city (Roma, città aperta)* to *General della Rovere (Il generale della Rovere)*, his work often returns to the values and questioning born out of the resistance movement.

His meeting with the actress Ingrid Bergman caused him to turn his work towards a lucid analysis of marital problems and the obstacles to communication between individuals, with films such as *Stromboli* and *The lonely woman (Viaggio in Italia, also known as Voyage to Italy)*.

Although a controversial film-maker, he is considered as one of the fathers of cinematographic modernity and had an undeniably strong and lasting influence on European directors of the post-war period.

**The screenplay** was written by Rossellini and the young Federico Fellini and adapted from a story by Sergio Amidei. Although the story clearly draws inspiration from the lives of real people and numerous authentic events that took place during this tragic period of modern Italian history, the film is nevertheless a work of fiction in which the narrative mingles episodes from everyday life with moments of heroism and melodrama, such as Manfredi's love affair, and action scenes. The film is constructed in such a way as to juxtapose short, separate episodes that are linked together through one character or another. The storyline is deliberately simple and the dialogue is scanty. But humour is not completely missing and Don Pietro occasionally shows himself to be a mischievous priest.

**Public reception** was enthusiastic. The film's immense success can be partly explained by its intrinsic qualities – a strong storyline full of emotion and authenticity – and partly to the exceptional skill of the cast, of which the great

Anna Magnani was a member. It is also probably true that the film's flattering portrayal of the Italian resistance movement managed to satisfy practically everybody, praising the patriotic commitment of the militant communists, the dedication of the simple folk, the heroism of the catholic priests and even the actions of monarchist officers. To this extent, the film's success was a sign of post-war Italy's hopes for agreement from all quarters, before the great social and political struggles took over once again.

The film was awarded the *Palme d'or* at the 1948 Cannes Film Festival.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Italy in the winter and spring of 1944: the allied advance is making slow progress. Rome, declared an open city, is still in the hands of the Germans, who impose a harsh martial law with the collaboration of the remaining fascist militias.

The film tells the tragic story of three members of the resistance network: Manfredi, an engineer, intellectual and militant communist; Don Pietro, a charitable priest; and Francesco, a simple printer.

Manfredi, who is being hunted by the Gestapo, seeks refuge with Pina, the widow whom Francesco is to marry. He entrusts Don Pietro with an important mission.

Meanwhile, the boys in the district, one of whom is Marcello, Pina's young son, carry out improvised acts of sabotage, greatly angering their parents, who are worried about the consequences of these uncontrolled acts of patriotism.

Manfredi's hiding place is betrayed by the carelessness of his mistress, a fragile, drug-addicted music hall dancer manipulated by a German spy. The Germans surround the area. Francesco is arrested and taken away in a lorry. Pina runs behind screaming, only to be pitilessly shot dead before her son's eyes.

Manfredi, arrested a short time later, is tortured by the SS: he dies without talking. The priest, Don Pietro, who is also arrested along with an Austrian deserter he has taken in, has been subjected to the sight of his friend's martyrdom; as he, too, refuses to give any information, he is sentenced to be shot. The children from the district, whistling a patriotic tune, accompany him as he is taken to his death. The firing squad hesitates to shoot and the German officer has to execute him with a bullet in the back of the head.

**Choices and perspective.** Few professional actors and no constructed set. The extremely limited means with which the film was shot give it an undeniably authentic atmosphere from which it derives all its emotional power. It is a moving account of the sacrifice accepted by Italian patriots from different social backgrounds, with different political leanings and religious beliefs, united in the fight against oppression. It paints an idealised picture of the resistance movement, which effaced internal squabbles and contradictions but echoed the hopes

of the Italian people in the period of terrible difficulty that immediately followed the end of the war.

*Pointers for analysing the film*

1. *The refusal to use cinematographic effects*

- Is the photographic contrast generally high or rather grey? What sort of images does it bring to mind? (There is no interplay of violent contrasts through the use of artificial lighting.)
- Framing: is there any strange or sophisticated framing?
- Are there any close-ups? Explain why there are so few of them: the camera captures the characters and their surroundings (other characters or parts of the scenery, which convey a specific social context).
- The scenery: where do the sequences appear to have been shot? Give a detailed description of these two contrasting interiors: Pina's plain apartment and the German officer's quarters.
- The techniques used for filming are similar to those used in documentaries: identify the principal techniques and assess their effect.

2. *The unity of the Italian people*

- Which characters belong to the resistance networks or give them their support? Which social groups do they belong to?
- All age groups are represented: identify the various scenes in which they appear.
- How does the screenplay pay tribute to all the different people who make up the resistance movement, including, for example, royalist officers? Say why it is important that one of them should be a priest and analyse how the character is constructed to make him very likeable to viewers.
- The role and importance of women in the Italian people's resistance movement. In order to study attitudes, it is important to note the ambiguity of the line taken by the film with regard to the nature of women. Give a detailed description of Pina, a character who inspires admiration and, through Anna Magnani's remarkable performance, becomes emblematic of the Roman "mamma", brave, vivacious, impassioned and full of tenderness for her family and friends. But there is also a fragile female character, Marina, the music hall dancer, whose weaknesses lead to betrayal.

3. *Who is the enemy and how is the enemy represented?*

- In what way is the presence of the deserter (a minor role when it boils down to it) important to the film's message? What are the reasons for his acts? How is he received by the priest?

- Nazis and fascists. Study the various human types portrayed. Some incur greater dislike than others: which ones and why? What methods do they use?

**Summary:** Using all the above observations, set out the key ideas of the film.

## The battle of the rails (La bataille du rail) by René Clément

France, 1946, B/W, 85 min.

Themes: nationalism – world war – relations between men and women

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** René Clément (born in Bordeaux in 1913) turned to the cinema soon after studying architecture. From 1937 to 1944 he made a series of short films, mostly documentaries but including a burlesque with Jacques Tati. Following the liberation of occupied French territory, the newly founded Coopérative générale du cinéma français selected him to direct *The battle of the rails*. The film was highly successful and launched René Clément's career – Cocteau called on him when filming *Beauty and the beast* (*La belle et la bête*).

René Clément made several other films on the wartime period and the occupation, including *Mr Orchid* (*Le père tranquille*, 1946), *The damned* (*Les maudits*, 1947), *Forbidden games* (*Jeux interdits*, 1952) and *Is Paris burning?* (*Paris brûle-t-il?*, 1966). He is seen as both a eulogist of the Resistance and a lucid and poetic witness to the war.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he tended to specialise in prestigious adaptations of literary works, including Emile Zola's *Gervaise* and Marguerite Duras' *The sea wall* (*Barrage contre le Pacifique*).

René Clément, one of the best French film-makers of the post-war period, was strongly contested by the young directors of the New Wave.

**The context at the time of filming.** In the general enthusiasm surrounding the liberation of occupied France, most films were documentaries commissioned by the Coopérative générale du cinéma français, whose director, Louis Dauquin, was a member of the Resistance and the French Communist Party. René Clément started work on the screenplay in September 1944, but shooting only began in April 1945. Having learned his trade by making documentaries, he endeavoured to preserve their forcefulness and authenticity. In this, he was given invaluable assistance by the great cinematographer Henri Alekan, who used the camera in the manner of news cameramen.

In a France that was being rebuilt and where restrictions were still severe, only meagre funds were available to René Clément, but he knew how to make the

best out of this situation. As a result, certain scenes create a tremendous impression of true life: real bullets are fired as blanks were not to be had, the explosions are real and a genuine armoured train was derailed, filmed by three cameras, as there were not enough technicians or money for elaborate special effects.

Most of the actors were railway employees, members of the *Résistance-Fer*, the Railway Resistance network, which was one of the film's co-producers. Few of the actors were professional and they were not well known. The Germans were chosen from among prisoners. The credits show all the actors in alphabetical order and give only their surnames. This was done to highlight the collective effort involved and avoid setting any of the actors up as stars.

**Public reception.** Winner of the *Grand Prix* and best direction awards at the first Cannes Film Festival in 1946, the film enjoyed enormous public success. After the many dark years they had been through, the people of France needed heroes. What is more, the film is in keeping with the precepts of both major currents in the Resistance, the communists and the Gaullists, in that it makes no mention of either the Vichy regime or collaboration.

But despite its huge success, the film did not really go down in posterity. Although for many years it continued to be screened on the French film club circuit and in schools, it is largely unknown to the younger generations of today, in spite of its great historical interest.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The film shows the activities of the *Résistance-Fer* networks between 1940 and 1944 (providing safe passage, handing out leaflets and underground propaganda, sabotage, bomb attacks) and then the joint action taken by railway workers and the Maquis to delay, block and destroy German convoys heading for the Normandy front. There is no real storyline, rather the film is a series of episodes in chronological order.

**Choices and perspective.** In 1946, René Clément said, "The cinema should respond to the social concerns of its audience, who should find hope in it while remaining clear-minded. I think that this concept can be expressed by the phrase 'aesthetic social realism'." In fact, a modern analytical study must take account of the official and consensual image of the Resistance given by *The battle of the rails*. The film was approved by the Comité national de la résistance (National Resistance Committee), which emphasised the authenticity of the various scenes. We are clearly dealing with a work determined to achieve a patriotic consensus, a hagiographic epic in which all the characters are heroes in their own right, ready for the sacrifice and all supporting one another. This in no way detracts from the film's historical interest, but it does mean that a number of precautions need to be taken when analysing it.

*Suggestions for subjects for analysis: portrayals in the film*

1. *A unanimous France, the French people committed to a single cause and standing shoulder to shoulder*

- What overall image of the conflict do we have after seeing the film? The image of a national struggle against the enemy: the German occupying forces. They are the only designated adversaries.
- All those involved (French railway workers) are united in the struggle. It shows a homogeneous Resistance, free of internal dispute or tension, which has the unanimous support of the French population.
- No mention of, or allusions to, traitors, collaborators or Vichy supporters are to be found in the film. There are simply a few ironic references to an employee's ears being close to the ground or a stationmaster's wait-and-see attitude. Personal failings and individual weaknesses are therefore pointed out, but there is no question of any political condemnation (and yet the purges were still going on at the time the film was made).
- The overall image is that of a whole country united in its struggle.

2. *A flattering image of the Resistance*

- The Railway Resistance network is presented as a very well structured organisation with a flawless hierarchy all the way from the chief engineer down to engine drivers, mechanics and signalmen. This organisation ensures that the work is done effectively (saving time, for instance). It meets the criteria of a large modern firm.
- There is no trace of internal tension or possible conflict. All aspects of the “class struggle” (one of the other angles from which the Resistance can be seen) are wiped away.
- These choices reflect the ideology of the period of reconstruction propagated by the Gaullists and communists alike. France will stand proud once more thanks to the work of the whole population, which, sleeves rolled up, participates in great national projects. The consensual image of the Resistance is refocused on meeting post-war needs (reconstruction, nationalisation, etc).

3. *Women are somewhat forgotten*

- Identify the scenes in which women are present or play a role. It will be seen that they make only rare appearances in the film – three barely sketched minor roles: one of the secretaries at the Kommandatur, the wife of the retired man approached by the Resistance, and a woman member of the Maquis.
- Note the qualities and faults (there are some!) of these three characters.
- At a time when French women have finally been given the right to vote and have played a very active role in the Resistance, and despite Colette

Audry's name appearing in the credits, the film strongly stresses the men's struggle. Is this characteristic of the attitudes of the period?

4. *Describe the various ways in which the Germans are caricatured in the film* (for example, Prussian officers are identified with nazi fanatics).

5. *Aesthetic and narrative choices:* certain critics considered that the film reflected the ideological choices of 1945: a Soviet model of didactic documentary with collective heroes as opposed to the American model, which is based on an exciting storyline and breathtaking episodes. In fact, echoes of Italian neo-realism and, especially, the influence of binding circumstances can also be detected.



## Kanal – they loved life (Kanal) by Andrzej Wajda

*Poland, April 1957, B/W, 94 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – patriotism – world war – resistance*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Andrzej Wajda (born in 1926) is the symbol and main director of the new generation of Polish film-makers. The son of a Polish army officer (executed by the Soviets in Katyn), he grew up in an atmosphere of patriotism and romantic heroism. In 1944, at the age of 18, he was drawn to the resistance movement and served in the ranks of the Armia Krajowa (AK), the Home Army. After the war, he studied fine art before enrolling at the brand new Lodz cinema school. After making a few short films, he became Aleksander Ford's assistant. In 1957, his second feature film, *Kanal*, brought him international public recognition. Since then, he has continued to increase his international audience with a series of major films that tackle the problems facing modern-day Poland. His greatest films include *Man of marble* (*Czlowiek z marmaru*, 1977), *Man of iron* (*Czlowiek z zelaza*, 1981) and *The land of promise* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1974).

The most famous director of Polish cinema is also the most typically Polish, constantly drawing on the nation's collective memory and reworking it with a powerful sense of film direction. In so doing, he does not simply describe the events of his era; he actively stirs his homeland's historical conscience.

**The screenplay** was written by Jerzy Stefan Stawinski and based on one of his own stories. This author and screenwriter had been an officer in the Armia Krajowa and had actually lived through some of the events he later wrote about. Given Wajda's own experience, it is easy to understand how the film is driven by a powerful authenticity.

**The film was made in a new social and political context: the Polish thaw.** In 1956, a period of intense popular agitation, the Polish regime took a considerable step forward with the eviction of the Stalinist old guard and Gomulka's return to power.

The disappearance of Stalinist censorship enabled Poland to take a new look at its recent past. The value of all aspects of the Polish resistance movement's action against the occupying nazis was reasserted. The struggle led by the Armia Krajowa, the Home Army, which had been maligned and discredited during the

Stalinist period (its leaders had been accused of treachery and collusion with the enemy) was finally rehabilitated. Gomulka declared, "All the blood shed for Poland, wherever it came from, is precious to us." The Warsaw Rising, long considered a delicate subject and kept under wraps, aroused new interest.

In the cinematographic industry, the splitting up of the cumbersome state production body, Film Polski, into smaller, more flexible units directed by artists of repute, breathed real freedom into the studios. Although censorship had not completely disappeared, film-makers were given new opportunities for expression that led to more authentic and daring approaches.

In the seething intellectual and social climate that reigned at the time, the Polish public was divided over the film. It was received with reservation or even protest by a number of former members of the Resistance movement, who, while happy to see their combat, which had been denied by Stalinist propaganda, brought to the screen, expected to see a glorious tale of their collective exploits and were disappointed by such a Dantesque and desperate portrayal of the period.

The film was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and was acclaimed by international critics.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** The film tells the particularly tragic story of the Warsaw Rising against the German occupation in September 1944. Forced by the enemy to evacuate the Mokotow district, a handful of soldiers in the Polish Home Army try to reach another district, where the fighting continues. There is only one way of getting there, and that is through the sewers.

The small band resolutely sets off but soon gets separated into three groups, each of which tries its luck on a different route and encounters various obstacles. As a result, the narrative is split into three parallel stories telling the fates of the three groups.

Pursued by the Germans and completely exhausted, the officers and men fight to survive. They all meet with tragic ends.

**Choices and perspective.** *Kanal* is a black, tragic film. The pessimism of the storyline and the fate that awaits the characters show just how far the film moved away from the numerous "war" films of the Stalinist era, in which all the heroes were shown in a favourable light and as practically infallible in both their decisions and their attitudes. Furthermore, Wajda's work is intended to exorcise the recent past, in which Polish heroism was obscured by Stalinist lies. The central theme of the film takes the necessary but painful step of questioning the notions of glorious heroism and romantic exaltation which abound in great patriotic tales.

Wajda's film fuelled the renewed debate which was troubling Polish intellectuals. While paying tribute to the courageous fight of the Home Army, it raised a

number of issues that had been repressed for too long: why launch an uprising when it can only end in defeat? Does heroic, sometimes suicidal, action really further the patriotic cause it supposedly serves?

Nor does it evade the major political question, which could not possibly have been put under the Stalinist regime and which even in Gomulka's Poland, still overshadowed by its Soviet brother, continued to smack of heresy: why did the Red Army, which was camped on the opposite bank of the Vistula River, not act to aid the Polish uprising, instead of letting it be crushed by the occupying nazis before its very eyes?

**Suggested work.** Because the film reassesses the notion of patriotic heroism, it should be analysed as a whole. But the narrative process – the three parallel stories which tell of the dramatic events surrounding each attempt to get out of the sewers – is very suitable for group work. This work can be done together in the classroom, in tutorial groups or given for homework.

- First and foremost, *Kanal* is a breathtaking action film. Attention should therefore be paid to getting a proper understanding of the routes taken by the three groups and the misfortunes that befall them. However, it should be pointed out that some non-Polish students may find it difficult to grasp the sequence of events because of the sophisticated parallel editing of the various episodes.
- A little time may be spent describing the main ways in which the German enemy is portrayed. Do the Germans frequently appear on the screen and how are they depicted (realistically or as caricatures)? How are they referred to by the partisans?
- The nazis are not the groups of partisans' only enemy: what are their other enemies? The cold, lack of food and water, the darkness, etc. Emphasis should be given to the particularly dreadful aspects of this subterranean struggle, getting the class to identify and classify them in a general summary.
- The men react to danger, hope and death in many different ways. Sensitivities are crushed, different character traits come to the fore and cowardice, treachery and utter dedication rub shoulders with one another. With the help of questions to focus their attention, students should make a detailed analysis of the principal heroes' different views of patriotism and military heroism.
- The story makes room for love. Does this seem artificial and, therefore, a concession to a certain public taste for film romances? Or is it vital to the general theme of the film and, if so, why?

Finally, students could write a critique of the film, relating it to other documents. In addition to the usual historical documents, two Polish films made in the same period could provide further useful information and an excellent means of putting *Kanal* into perspective: *Heroism (Eroica – Scherzo alla polacca)* by Andrzej Munk, 1958, and *Lotna* by Andrzej Wajda, 1959.



## The cranes are flying (Letjat žuravli) by Mikhail Kalatozov

*Soviet Union, 1957, B/W, 95 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – relations between men and women*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Mikhail Kalatozov (1903-73) was born in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia. After studying economics, Kalatozov started out in films as an actor. However, he soon became a skilled cameraman in the tradition of the pioneers of Soviet cinema. After a series of documentary films, including the remarkable *Salt for Svanetia (Sol Svanetij)*, he tangled with Stalinist censorship: in 1932, his film *Nail in the boot (Gvozd v sapoge)* was banned and he withdrew from film-making for a time. The general mobilisation at the beginning of the war gave him an opportunity to return to direction and he made several patriotic propaganda films before being sent to the United States as cultural attaché from 1941 to 1945. When he returned to the Soviet Union, he held a post in the film industry before turning once more to directing films. *The cranes are flying* was undoubtedly his most successful film; those that followed were not to prove particularly popular.

**The screenplay.** Victor Rozov skilfully employs all the well-tried formulas of the great romantic melodramas. But he also manages to make all the characters, including apparently minor parts, such as the parents and the grandmother, very believable. The lyrical style of direction does not jar with the realism of the everyday situations but rather draws support from it.

**Public reception** was enthusiastic: the film, which won the *Palme d'or* at the 1958 Cannes Film Festival, was popular for a number of reasons. It was seen as a sign of a political thaw and its unbridled romanticism overwhelmed many a viewer. Western film critics were often captivated by the extraordinary virtuosity of the cameraman, Sergei Urusevskij, and the film's lyrical style. Film critic Eric Rohmer, who was to become a great French film director, wrote enthusiastically in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, "The final scene is imbued with a lyricism and photographic beauty in which form and content achieve a long-awaited reconciliation".

The film launched the career of actress Tatyana Samoylova, the extraordinary "little squirrel" of romantic love stories.

It is still highly regarded in western Europe, especially in France, where Serge Daney wrote that it was one of the few Russian films that “in a certain sense belonged to the collective memory of the French people”.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Moscow, June 1941. Boris and Veronika are in love. As they linger in the street, a superb flock of cranes flies overhead. But news has been announced of the German invasion. Boris wants to do his duty and joins up, against his family’s advice and in spite of Veronika’s tears. Veronika’s parents are killed and her home destroyed in an air raid. She is taken in by Boris’ parents, who still have no news of their son.

After resisting for a long time, Veronika gives in to the persistent wooing of Boris’ brother Mark, who has cleverly evaded conscription and found a “soft job” behind the lines. Veronika is working in a hospital: her contact with the wounded makes her realise how important it is to them that their loved ones should remain faithful. She becomes aware of the seriousness of her error. She leaves Mark, whose cowardice disgusts her. Torn between hope and fear, she waits for Boris to come back home. She does not know that he has fallen, alone and without glory, an anonymous victim in this inhuman war, and so she sets off for the station with a bunch of flowers to await the soldiers’ return.

**Choices and perspective.** This great, romantic film, full of pathos with its particularly moving scenes, also stands out, in the context of the themes we are dealing with, by its rejection of stereotypical views of “patriotic war” and Soviet heroism, which had been compulsory during the Stalinist period. The film sets a radically new tone and highlights situations which, until then, had been completely hidden away. The film bravely showed that the Russian population, far from being unanimously heroic as portrayed by a certain form of propaganda, had had its share of weaknesses and cowardliness, that some young Russians had shirked military service and that some young women had given in to the advances of seducers instead of waiting chastely and stoically for their fiancés to return from the front.

**The analytical work** should therefore focus on this refusal to portray war in the traditional heroic and pompous manner and the attempt to get as close to personal truths and tragic destinies as possible.

- *What are the main ways in which the reality of war is portrayed?* Distinguish clearly between the scenes showing the front (are there many?) and indications of the effects of the war on daily life behind the lines (air raids, restrictions, fears, etc.). It should be noted that no fighting is shown on the screen and that the film concentrates on civilians and life behind the lines. An intimist and personal approach replaces grand, monumental depictions.

- *War is not the ferment of heroism that unites a country, quite the contrary.* Note the wheeling and dealing, individual fiddles, cowardly or fearful behaviour and the abdication of responsibilities. Not all of the population is beyond reproach. In spite of all this, this denunciation of the defects and failings of the wartime period does not step beyond certain well-defined limits, which should be carefully studied. Does the film attack the political regime or its representatives in any way? Which characters and aspects of the situation are shown in a positive light?
- *Is Boris' death solitary and inglorious?* How does the manner in which this moving episode is treated turn heroic stereotypes on their heads? For example, the following questions could be asked: In what natural setting does the final battle take place? Does the soldiers' mission appear to be important? What words are used to describe the way in which the Russian troops are surrounded? Does Boris enjoy the sort of solidarity and virile camaraderie that are so often portrayed? How is this sequence filmed? What point of view is emphasised in this way? The scene of Boris' death is filmed using close-ups of the soldiers. There are practically no wide-angle, long or master shots. This clearly contrasts with, and reflects a rejection of, the heroic pictures of war that were imposed during the Stalinist period.
- *The portrayal of the enemy:* during the war and the years that followed, Soviet cinema was in a state of emergency. Its sacred duty was to muster the energy and fighting spirit of the entire population, and particularly of the soldiers in the Red Army. People therefore had to be taught to hate the enemy. Violent scenes were shot to stress the brutality and cruelty of the German troops: young women were tortured and children were murdered before their mothers' eyes, as in *The rainbow (Raduga)*, by Donskoy, 1944). The aim was to save the nation by stimulating hatred of the Germans, who were all identified with nazis and all judged guilty. In some films of the 1950s, the bestial image of the nazi was toned down and used as a foil for glorifying the heroism and skills of Russian soldiers. What happens in *The cranes are flying*? First of all, the camera focuses on individual Russian soldiers and their destinies: the physical reality of the Germans tends to disappear. Boris dies, killed by an invisible enemy.
- *The female characters:* How is their conduct portrayed? Is the audience encouraged to condemn them or understand them? How is the closing sequence in the film, which is highly charged with emotion, perceived? It should be emphasised that Tatyana waits for the very last shot before merging her private distress with the emotions of the crowd. This is a breach in the official doctrine of martyrdom of Stalinist cinema. The only scandal is that a life, or rather two lives, have been ruined by the war.





## The bridge (Die Brücke) by Bernhard Wicki

*West Germany, 1959, B/W, 92 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – children in war*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Bernhard Wicki was born in Vienna in 1919 of Swiss and Hungarian parents. He was essentially a major actor with an eclectic filmography, working with a range of very different directors which included Kautner, Pabst, Fassbinder, Antonioni and Handke. His first film as a director was *The bridge*, which he made in 1958. The film's success earned him a reputation as a war-films specialist, which in turn led to his being asked to co-direct the great American film *The longest day* in 1962. He made a number of other notable films, including a commendable adaptation of Dürrenmatt's play, *The visit (Der Besuch)*.

**The screenplay** was written by Michael Mansfield and Wilhelm Vivier and based on a largely autobiographical story by Manfred Gregor.

**Public and critical reception** in West Germany was very warm. It should be pointed out that German films on the second world war were scarce in the post-war years, because of the difficulties of reconstruction and the fears rising out of the first confrontations between East and West. The country was also faced with the delicate problem of guilt, and it was not easy to deal with a dark period that many people preferred not to talk about, and to try to forget.

The film was released in 1959, when the climate was less dramatic. International tension was easing and Germany was resolutely committed to European integration, and already enjoying the first fruits of the "economic miracle".

The bridge was the first attempt at exorcising a tragic past, and the consensual metaphor that it offered was given the general assent of the German public. It is very revealing that, at the time, the film was seen to be brimming with educational qualities: screenings were organised in schools and the film was seen by all German schoolchildren.

The bridge won numerous awards and enjoyed immense international success.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The death throes of Nazi Germany in the last months of the war. In the spring of 1945, five 15-to-16-year-olds from the same school are among those called up in the last waves of conscription ordered in a desperate attempt to counter the allied forces. Moved by their youth and aware of the futility of excessive resistance, the NCO responsible for training these inexperienced recruits tries to save them from disaster by sending them to defend a sector which is not under threat: a village with a small bridge of no strategic importance. But unfortunately, a column of American armoured vehicles takes this route. The young men, who have been brought up in the mould of official ideology and are imbued with fanatic nationalism, are carried away by the romantic exaltation of sacrifice. Little by little, the cold reality of combat rouses a critical awareness in some of them. Sadly, it is too late: all of them, save one, will die.

**Choices and perspective.** The film sets out to denounce the absurdity of war, in particular the useless, senseless sacrifices born out of it. It is also an open and direct criticism of the Third Reich's indoctrination of young people and its criminal propaganda: the patriotic illusions are cleverly maintained by unscrupulous leaders who are fully aware that it is pointless to continue the fight. The young men's enthusiasm, sense of sacrifice and taste for the absolute are therefore manipulated to serve an ideologically perverse purpose. The consequences of this misguided patriotism for the lives of these adolescents are obviously tragic, but long before this, it also corrupted the moral conscience of a number of people by taking away their moral bearings and prompting them to commit crimes.

### *Suggestions for work*

1. *Young people from different backgrounds caught up in a lethal spiral*
  - The five young men come from different social backgrounds, which should be carefully identified (their families' social status and, in this period where men are scarce, the presence or absence of father figures).
  - They also have psychological, emotional and personal problems. In what ways does the screenplay structure these characters' individual personalities? One of the boys is going through a period of conflict with his father and another is experiencing the intensity of his first romance: what about the others?
  - How do they react to being called up? Can any explanations for their reactions be found in their family environment or their social conditioning?
  - What are the most remarkable changes they go through during the fighting?
2. *A German society weary of the war*
  - Analyse the way in which civilians react to the turn taken by events.

- Special attention should be paid to the character of the teacher: how is he perceived by the young men?
  - How do the boys' parents react when their adolescent sons are called up?
  - Describe and explain the different attitudes of the officers in charge of the group of young people.
  - One particularly dramatic moment is when the sappers of the Wehrmacht, experienced veterans who have received orders to blow up the bridge, run up against the young men's unwillingness to understand what is going on: what two mind-sets clash as a result?
3. *The Americans' surprise at this unexpected resistance*
- Is the village bridge an important target?
  - Do they American soldiers realise whom they are dealing with? When do they realise? How do they react?
4. *Extra work*
- Study the role of fanatic German youth in the final battles of the war in the spring of 1945. For example, the last news bulletins issued by the nazi propaganda machine, exalting the role of the Hitlerjugend in the defence of Berlin, could be referred to.
  - The use of very young soldiers, who have been deprived of their childhood, in contemporary conflicts in Asia and Africa, as well as, unfortunately, in Europe, could be studied and compared with the situation in the film.



## Beyond nationalism?

### Jules and Jim (Jules et Jim) by François Truffaut

*France, 1961, B/W, 100 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – rapprochement between peoples – relations between men and women*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** François Truffaut (born in Paris in 1932, died 1984) was one of the strongest personalities in French cinema and an emblematic figure of the French New Wave. After a difficult and rebellious childhood, he was saved by his love for the cinema and his meeting with André Bazin, a famous film critic of the period. The young Truffaut began writing reviews, making full use of his knowledgeable and often fierce views on the cinema. His article “Acertain quality of French cinema” (“*Une certaine qualité du cinéma français*”) confirmed him as one of the leaders of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Moving at last to film direction, he made his name with his first feature, *The 400 blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*), for which he won the prize for Best Director at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival before attracting a very wide audience.

In 1961, *Jules and Jim*, his third feature film and now considered as a classic, marked an important stage in what was to be a prolific career.

**The screenplay** was faithfully based on a highly autobiographical novel by Henri-Pierre Roché, which tells the story of an audacious love affair: two men are in love with the same woman and manage to live with her in Paris in 1907. Truffaut’s film adaptation is superbly successful, a hymn to love and life. In the context of our study, it is important to note that the director put particular emphasis on the Franco-German problem, devoting long sequences to the Great War, which has a much more important place in the film than in the novel. François Truffaut was to return to memories of the Great War on several other occasions, notably in *The green room* (*La chambre verte*).

**The French New Wave.** Initially coined by journalists as a catchy name for the new generation, the term *Nouvelle Vague*, or New Wave, came to be used more specifically for the movement founded by young French film-makers at the end of the 1950s. The characteristics shared by the members of this informal movement, who included such differing personalities as Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, can be summarised as follows.

- They were all passionately interested in the cinema (with an extremely wide knowledge of cinematography, which many of them had acquired at Henri Langois' film library) and had spent some time as film critics: Truffaut had published film reviews in *Arts* and, later, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*.
- They had devised a veritable aesthetic programme, rejecting the conventions and clumsiness of what they called "Dad's cinema". They also refused to work with established screenwriters, wanting to be the "authors" of their films.
- They all made the move to film direction within a few months from 1958 to 1959, and their first films (*Handsome Serge – Le beau Serge*; *The 400 blows – Les quatre cents coups*; *Breathless – A bout de souffle*), partly because they dealt with modern subjects and partly because of the skilled, personal and free way in which they were directed, were hugely successful.

More broadly speaking, the New Wave was part of the widespread trend towards modernising French society that came with economic growth. It partly reflects the teeming new generation's aspirations for greater cultural and moral liberty and a freer life style.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In the "Gay Paris" of the days before the first world war, a Frenchman, Jim, and a German, Jules, form a deep friendship. They both fall in love with Catherine, a free and capricious young woman with modern ideas (played by Jeanne Moreau, who imbues the character with an unforgettable charm and frailty). They share a bohemian lifestyle and spend a pleasant holiday together in the south of France. Catherine decides to marry Jules and goes off to Germany with him.

The war separates Jules and Jim: they are called up to their respective countries' armies. They do their duty, dreading that they might come face to face with each other. At the end of the war, Jim joins the couple in a mountain chalet in Germany. Catherine has borne Jules a daughter, but is not happy. Jules allows her to take Jim as her lover. But Catherine is unstable and uncertain. Their relationship deteriorates and Jim returns to France.

A few years later, at the beginning of the 1930s, Catherine joins Jim in Paris, where there is unsettling news of the rise of nazism, and invites him to go for a drive. She accelerates and drives the car straight into a river, killing them both. Jules has their bodies cremated.

### *Suggestions for research*

In the context of our study, educational work on this complex story of emancipated love and faithful friendship could be limited to two approaches: analytical and synoptic.

**The analysis** should focus one of the sequences central to the film: the portrayal of the 1914-18 war.

- How much importance is the conflict given in the film (the time given over to it, the choice and impact of the images)? A comparison with the novel will prove to be particularly enlightening.
- What images and especially sound are used to link the war sequence with the previous sequence? What meaning is conveyed by this editing?
- What shots are used in the war sequence? Where do these images come from? Careful viewing will make it possible to distinguish documentary footage, most of which was provided by the French army cinematographic archives, from footage taken from 1930s fiction films and the director's own reconstitution (if only through the presence of the characters).
- What attitude is adopted by the two friends during the war? The absence of any antimilitarist message in the film should be stressed: the protagonists do their duty on their respective sides; both of them are shown in uniform. But do they share the same moral and intellectual positions?
- Do you think it was possible to have such an attitude in the atmosphere of confrontation of the first world war?
- The cemetery in Vieil Armand: what is the meaning of this walk among the crosses, and what is its place in the film?
- The days following the end of the war: a great deal is said in few words or pictures, the war was fratricidal, but there is no hatred. Nor is there any triumphalism, only the relief of having come through it unscathed and the joy of knowing that their friend is alive. The women find it somewhat difficult to understand the two veterans' complicity.

**The synoptic work**, which is more demanding but may be carried out by several groups of students, should bear on the image of the German friend throughout the film.

- Oskar Werner, the actor who plays Jules, is Austrian. Is Jules' nationality explicitly mentioned in the film? How can this caution on the part of the director be explained (the novel is clearer on this subject)? The clues that enable viewers to identify Jim's nationality, however, are many and various. Note down some of them and say whether any of them derive from national stereotypes.
- Is "Jules' country" clearly defined in geographical terms (mention is made of a region "near the Rhine")? What German landscapes are shown in the film? What general picture of Germany do they call to mind? It should be pointed out that the scenes with the chalet were shot on the Alsatian side of the Vosges mountains.
- Are any Germans apart from Jules seen in the film? If so, how are they portrayed? Is German often spoken in the film?

- The voice-over at the beginning of the film tells us that each of them taught the other his language and literature. To what extent is the two friends' relationship during the carefree years before the war based on mutual cultural discoveries and shared artistic taste? Does this "Europe of culture" not appear very "French-oriented"? What important artistic and cultural movements are not mentioned? What can be deduced from this?
- Are there any references to nazism in the film? If so, what are they?
- The film's closing scene shows Jules standing alone at the Strasbourg crematorium with the ashes of his two friends before him. How can the ambiguity of this scene be interpreted?

**Summary.** Use all the observations made above to outline the film's key ideas. The audacity and limits of the film both contribute to changing the image of Germans in the cinema, which had long remained very negative. What can be said about Franco-German reconciliation as portrayed in this film, which was made at the beginning of the 1960s by a director who had a generous character and was devoted to modernity, but nevertheless heir to painful memories of the past?



## The crossing of the Rhine (Le passage du Rhin) by André Cayatte

*France, 1960, B/W, 120 min.*

*Themes: nationalism – world war – Franco-German reconciliation – relations between men and women*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** The fame of French director André Cayatte (1909-89) reached its peak in the 1950s. Cayatte, a journalist, lawyer and novelist, became involved in the cinema at the end of the 1930s by writing screenplays. He was taken prisoner in 1940, but managed to escape. As he had no valid papers, he was forced to work for Continental Films, the German production company in Paris, for whom he made his first films from 1942 onwards. This was to cause him a certain amount of trouble after the liberation of Paris. After the war, he gained the public's and the critics' attention through his committed films on issues of public concern, pleas against the death penalty, satires directed at the failings of the justice system, well-argued attacks against the weaknesses of family upbringing, and so on. He was strongly criticised by the film-makers of the New Wave, who accused him of concentrating too much on expounding an argument to the detriment of the aesthetic considerations of direction. He gradually withdrew from film-making in the 1970s.

**The screenplay** was written by André Cayatte and based on an idea given to him by Armand Jammot. In the 1950s, this journalist friend of Cayatte's had made a series of reports on former French prisoners who had decided to start a new life in Germany, and he contributed many authentic anecdotes to the screenplay. But the director also relied on his own experiences for the material reconstitution of the period and the questioning that arose out of it. The film echoed Cayatte's longstanding personal doubts and hesitations and, in remarkable fashion, prompted a new way of perceiving the old "hereditary enemy" among the community as a whole.

In keeping with the standard practice of the French cinema industry in the 1950s, the dialogues were rewritten by Maurice Auberger.

Since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, French public opinion had been marked by two apparently opposing trends: the return of General de Gaulle to the country's leadership had restored the spirit of the Resistance, on which his political legitimacy was founded, to its place of honour. But at the same time,

the courageous policy of Franco-German rapprochement, which he led with Chancellor Adenauer, helped to prepare attitudes for a necessary reconciliation. Public reception of Cayatte's film, which was one of the first post-war films to portray a simple, likeable German family, was very warm: with hindsight, this can be seen as an important indication of the change in French public opinion.

*The crossing of the Rhine* was awarded the Golden Lion at the 1960 Venice Film Festival.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Two Frenchmen are taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940. One of them, Jean, is a brilliant and ambitious journalist. The other, Roger, is a kind and obliging pastrycook. The stories of the two men are told in parallel: as prisoners, they are both assigned to a work party in the country, where they toil as auxiliary labourers in various agricultural holdings. In the small village where they are put under the guard of a Nazi café owner, Jean and Roger make different choices. Jean escapes, returns to France, joins the Resistance and becomes the editor of his newspaper. But he achieves this heroic outcome at the cost of losing much of his humanity: his escape is successful because he betrays the confidence of Helga, the young daughter of the peasant couple for whom he and Roger work. Roger, on the other hand, refuses to buy his freedom by playing a "dirty trick" on the family that has treated him so well. He stays in Germany and gradually becomes accepted into this circle of simple folk. He shares their daily life, their labour on the land as the seasons turn, and their joys and hardships in these long, difficult years. His hard work and dedication soon make him indispensable at a time when generations of men are being called up one after the other to fight in an "all-out war". Feelings of tenderness gradually blossom between Roger and Helga.

Once the war is over, Roger returns to France but, unhappy and disappointed with his rehabilitation, he prefers to go back to Germany, where he feels useful and appreciated.

**Choices and perspective.** The idea behind Cayatte's film is an original one in French cinema: showing the second world war from a German village's point of view. Although the implicit comparison of two parallel destinies is somewhat cumbersome, and Jean's story may appear to be too illustrative, the fate of the little pastrycook, who is gradually admitted into the village community and comes to be liked, is both interesting and moving. The film puts forward a humanist point of view, where people of goodwill succeed in overcoming suspicion and national prejudices in order to work and survive together.

**Most of the educational work** should be focused on how the little pastrycook's view of the Germans develops as he gets to know them in the various sequences. Played by the highly popular singer Charles Aznavour, the character represents the "average Frenchman", a stereotype, a modest tradesman, whose common sense and human kindness make up for his lack of diplomas. He is undoubtedly

the most likeable character and the one that an audience can most easily identify with. As such, he is the bearer of the film's main message, that of a possible Franco-German entente, for which his romance with Helga is the most tender metaphor.

The analysis should therefore concentrate on his various encounters with the Germans, giving as many details as possible.

- When he is called up in 1939, what attitude is he caught in? What framing is used to portray this? How much importance can be placed on the bars of the basement window in this scene? What are his father-in-law's main remarks regarding the Germans? How does he respond to them?
- What is the first glimpse of the German enemy in the film? What effect is created by the tilting down of the camera (discovery of the column of prisoners)?
- The journey from the Rhine to the German heartland: how is the naïve way in which the prisoners discover the landscape expressed?
- The arrival in the village: describe the nazi notable (the café owner) and comment on his remarks concerning relations with German women. What attitude is shown by the first Germans the prisoners encounter (children, a young woman with a baby, etc.)? How do the prisoners react to it?
- The host peasant family: the various members of the family have different attitudes towards the Frenchmen. What are the reasons for this?
- Transporting the potatoes: how are the germs of complicity between Roger and the young Helga hinted at? Do you think this is plausible in relation to the film as a whole?
- Why does Roger refuse to escape with Jean? Comment on his attitude.
- How does Roger manage to get himself accepted by the burgomaster's family and the village community?
- What reasons are given in the film for Roger's return to Germany after the war?
- A secondary, but nevertheless interesting task could be to study the way in which the war years are shown from the German point of view (by a French film director!).
- Why was it decided to show French audiences "rural" Germany instead of a city?
- How does the film depict the deterioration of the German population's situation during the conflict?
- Which sufferings and misfortunes are shown most frequently?
- How is nazi totalitarianism portrayed? Does the film distinguish between Germans and nazis? If so, how does it do this and in what circumstances? Special attention should be paid not only to the different attitudes, but also to the various details of the set, for example the portraits hanging on the walls.



## The perfect circle (Savršeni krug) by Ademir Kenovic

*Bosnia and Herzegovina/France, 1997, colour, 110 min.*

*Themes: the resurgence of nationalism – the denunciation of the violence of war – children in war*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Ademir Kenovic was born in Sarajevo in 1950. After attending university there, he went to the United States in 1972 to study cinema and literature at Denison University. He began working for Sarajevo television in 1976, making documentaries and programmes for schools. In 1986, he directed his first feature film. In 1989, he was invited to teach at the Sarajevo Academy of Film and Theatre. His second film, *Kuduz*, was nominated for three European Film Academy Felix Awards.

In 1990, he was one of the founding members of SaGA, the Sarajevo Group of Authors, which, during the siege, was one of the few places where culture could still be expressed. In 1994, at the height of the conflict, he made *MGM Sarajevo: man, God, the monster (MGM Sarajevo: covjek, Bog, monstrum)*. *The perfect circle* was the first Bosnian film to be made in Sarajevo after the war.

**The screenplay** was written by Ademir Kenovic and Abdulah Sidran, with contributions by Pjer Zalica.

**The context at the time of release.** The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its dreadful massacres and the lengthy siege of Sarajevo, had moved and shocked European public opinion. The prolonged apathy of European governments had angered many intellectuals, including film-makers. *The perfect circle*, which was made as soon as the Dayton Accords had been signed, is an unforgettable account of the events that had taken place. The critical acclaim that greeted the film's release was no token of expression of compassion; the film is remarkably well constructed and directed, in spite of the obviously huge difficulties. It is particularly likely to move teenage school audiences and will provide a stimulating introduction to the prickly question of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In their bedroom in a small house in the country not far from Sarajevo, Adis and Kerim, two children of 7 and 9 years old, suddenly hear the sound of

gunshots and a great commotion. The village is being attacked by a commando of hooded men armed to the teeth, who set fire to the houses and machine-gun the inhabitants. The two children hide under their beds and then manage to escape through a window without being seen. Their entire family has been killed. They witness scenes of brutality, but finally succeed in reaching the outskirts of Sarajevo. By chance, they find refuge with Hamza, a poet whose wife and daughter, worn out by the shelling and the awful conditions of life under the siege, have just left Sarajevo in a convoy.

Hamza cannot leave the children to fend for themselves, especially since he now realises that Kerim is deaf and dumb. He endeavours to help them trace their aunt Aiša, their only relative in Sarajevo and the sole surviving member of their close family. Hamza takes the two children on a long expedition, made dangerous by sniper fire, to the district where their aunt used to live. Their journey is in vain: the aunt has been wounded during the shelling, hospitalised and then evacuated to Germany by a humanitarian organisation. Hamza has no option but to look after the children, to whom he is beginning to become attached.

Hamza and the children struggle to overcome the difficulties of daily life in a town in ruins. With the fall of snow winter has arrived, a harsh one as is often the case in Sarajevo. The implacable siege of the city by the “chetniks”, Serb militia-men, makes life even tougher. It is difficult to go anywhere at all and finding drinking water and food is a constant problem. Hunger is rife. The civilians who have taken refuge in the cellars sway between moments of hope, which flares up at the wildest rumour, and discouragement, when the fight for survival, for a little wood to burn or a pigeon to eat, sometimes tears longstanding companionships apart and sparks violent clashes. Some people cannot stand the strain.

Fortunately, the children’s energy and life-force are contagious. They take in a wounded dog and make friends with their neighbour’s young daughter. They share dreams and laughter with Hamza, and sometimes set out on daring expeditions, like going fishing in the river under the chetniks’ noses.

Hamza thinks he has found a way of getting the children out of Sarajevo, but they have to cross the enemy lines near the airport. The attempt proves to be even more dangerous than was thought. A cruel destiny awaits the children of Sarajevo.

**Choices and perspective.** “I have seen horror, destruction, death and torture. My way of fighting all that was to make a film that was caring and simple, and exciting as well ... I also wanted it to be as authentic as possible in terms of emotion, atmosphere and the events I was describing. I tried to write a story that everyone could understand, because barbarity is, alas, universal. I wanted to shout out loud, with all my strength, that no one, anywhere, should ever again have to live through what happened in Sarajevo between 1992 and 1997.” (Ademir Kenovic, *Télérama*, 1997)

*Analysis of how the various events in the film portray:*

1. *A terrible siege*

- The suffering endured by the inhabitants: giving specific examples, describe the ways in which the civilian population of Sarajevo suffered (water supply, provisions, heating and electricity, means of transport, telephone communications, etc.).
- Solidarity or conflict? How does the director depict the reactions of the people in Sarajevo – Hamza’s circle of acquaintances or other individuals – to the difficulties of everyday life? Do reflexes of solidarity always hold sway over selfish survival reflexes or aggressive impulses? Does the director seek to portray the people of Sarajevo in a heroic light? Give reasons for your answers. What do these choices tell us?
- Death is never far away: give examples of everyday-life situations that have become dangerous because of the siege. Study the various ways in which death is depicted, compared with television news footage.
- Is this “disturbing” film sad? In what ways do humour, poetry and music contribute to the “perfect circle”? Why was the film given this title and what does it symbolise?

2. *A merciless enemy*

- Identify the various incidents in which the enemy is seen.
- How is the enemy portrayed in each scene? How do they come across? What special cinematographic effects are used to create these effects on the senses?
- While the international community stands by and watches: what allusions are made in the images or dialogue to other European countries, particularly France? What do you think of the scene in which Hamza and the two children observe the Christmas party at the embassy?
- What references are there to the United States, Nato and the United Nations?
- What explanation can you find for the positions taken by the international powers at the time?

**Synoptic study.** Use all the information above to define the director’s overall view. Other documentary material, such as other accounts of the events of the period, articles published in the press and maps, should be used to explain this point of view.





## **II. WOMEN IN EUROPE**



## The suffering and courage of women

### Mother ('Mat') by Vsevolod Pudovkin

*Soviet Union, 1926 B/W, 84 min.*

*Themes: female emancipation – workers' struggles – revolution*

*To be pointed out: two photograms of the mother's face at the beginning and end of the film to show the change of dignity undergone by the character during her long awakening*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953) was one of the greatest film directors of the Golden Age of Soviet cinema in the 1920s. He was no stranger to the trials and tribulations of history – he was called up, wounded and taken prisoner during the first world war before being drawn to the cinema. He started working in Kuleshov's workshop in Moscow in 1920. He developed theories on the art of silent films, and his ideas on editing, close-ups and slow motion, which he put into practice in several films (*Mother*, 1925 – *The end of St Petersburg*, 1927 – *Storm over Asia*, 1928), made him one of the undisputed pioneers of silent films. In the 1930s, subjected first to the new demands of sound films and then to the strict instructions of "social realism", he gradually became an official film-maker, and his later works are all too often mere illustrations of the regime's propaganda (*Vasili's return*, 1953).

The film *Mother*, which is an adaptation of the Gorki novel, a work renowned far beyond the boundaries of old Russia, was in fact shot under official contract: the film industry had been nationalised under the new Soviet state in 1919. The initial project was to have formed part of the celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of the revolutionary uprisings in 1905, which had troubled the Tsarist empire for several months before being brutally repressed.

In fact, Pudovkin was chosen at the last minute to make the film, and was apparently given generous leeway for adapting Maxim Gorky's novel, with the help of the scriptwriter Nathan Zarkhi. The choice of the great actress Vera Baranovskaya to portray the mother was important: she really put everything she had into the role, lending it a superb expressive quality.

**Public reaction.** The film was a great public success when it came out in the Soviet Union in 1926. Like most Soviet films at the time, it was not distributed through the normal commercial circuits in France. It was distributed through two parallel channels: by activists supporting the French Communist Party, and via the film club networks run by cinema enthusiasts.

Today the film is both a 1920s Soviet film classic and an indisputable European cinema masterpiece, which is often quoted as such in the various histories of the film industry. It is sometimes broadcast in “cultural” programmes on European TV channels.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** In the town of Tvera in 1905, Vlasov, a workman, arrives home, drunk as usual. He beats up his submissive, frightened wife. His son Pavel tries to protect his mother by threatening his father.

Serious social confrontation is bubbling up: the father is recruited as a hired hand by agitators in the pay of the factory owners, while Pavel, a female friend and a group of young workers organise a strike. Pavel hides weapons under the floorboards of the family house.

At the factory there is violent confrontation between workers and strike breakers. Old Vlasov is killed. While the mother is keeping watch over her husband's body, the police arrive to search the house. Hoping to save her son, the mother shows them the arms cache, and Pavel is immediately arrested, to the despair of his deluded mother. He is convicted after an unfair trial, while his mother pleads for his forgiveness. On the first of May, while workers are demonstrating all over the town, Pavel's escape from prison is organised. Under cover of the widespread confrontations in the town Pavel manages to join the demonstration, where he has the joy of being reunited with his mother.

However, the police repression flares into extreme violence: the soldiers open fire, and Pavel dies in his mother's arms. She takes up the flag and faces the charging horsemen.

**Choices and perspective.** The film is an account of an awakening: a submissive woman crushed by extreme poverty, her husband's violence and the brutal police repression during the workers' uprisings, discovers the way to her own emancipation through the example of her son's militancy.

Of course the film is Manichean, marked as it is by the ideological climate of the 1920s: it would be easy to enumerate the excessive cinematographic caricatures used to ridicule or condemn the supporters of the factory owners and advocates of the established social order.

However, the description of the mother's gradual transformation is remarkable, in her relation to the oppressive forces crushing her, among which Pudovkin is careful to include the power struggle within the couple itself: the husband's violence in the opening sequence heralds and foreshadows the social violence at the end of the film.

*Analysis of the transformation of a character based on comparison of two sequences*

*Opening sequence:*

1. What is the real reason why Vlasov returns home? What is the possible significance of the shot of the policeman outside the bar? How does the film show that this brutal man is himself a product of a brutal society?
2. What film framing and editing techniques are used to contrast the two figures of the father and the mother? Which images do you feel best symbolise the woman's powerlessness and humiliation? Give reasons for your answer.
3. In what respect does this sequence prevent the film from lapsing into oversimplistic propaganda on the class war? What kind of fundamental violence does it highlight? To what specific forms of violence are women exposed?

*Closing sequence*

1. Describe the reunion between the mother and her son, and analyse the sensory effects used. How is the story of these two individuals interwoven with the collective (hi)story?
2. What film framing and editing techniques are used to highlight the mother's new-found dignity? How important are the actress's acting skills in her physical transformation?
3. Comment on the shots of the mother's death: how do they succeed in moving the audience?
4. Which shots show that the story is being appropriated for propaganda purposes?

**Summary.** Can the evolution of the mother's character be seen as a process of female emancipation?

**Critical comparison.** Students could be asked to conduct a whole range of complementary research activities on: the adaptation of the Gorki novel – why does the screenplay sometimes depart from it (especially as it brings in a new character, the father?); the status of women in workers' circles in early 20th-century Russia; and the Soviet conceptions of the emancipation of women.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ed. note: for a study on the condition of women in Stalin's Russia, see the teaching pack by Ruth Tudor, *Teaching 20th century women's history: a classroom approach*, Council of Europe Publishing, 2000.



## Angèle by Marcel Pagnol

France, 1931, B/W, 150 min.

Themes: status of women – patriarchal domination – illegitimate child

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Marcel Pagnol was born in Aubagne in 1895, and died in 1974. The son of a primary school teacher, whom he described so eloquently in his *Souvenirs d'enfance* (childhood memories), this southern Frenchman began his professional life as an English teacher. However, he quickly earned a reputation for his plays in the 1920s: the extraordinary success of *Topaze* in 1927 and *Marius* in 1928 established him as a playwright.

Marcel Pagnol had long been interested in the cinema, but had to wait for the development of talking picture techniques to use his full verve as a dialogue writer. His first few films were adaptations of his theatrical works, for example the highly acclaimed trilogy *Marius*, *Fanny* and *César*. The public success was enormous at both national and international levels. This persuaded Marcel Pagnol to devote himself exclusively to the cinema. For his second film he set up his own production company, La société des films Marcel Pagnol. He was certain that the dramatist of the past would be the film-maker of the future, a thesis which he controversially developed in a short-lived critical review entitled *Les cahiers du film*.

**The screenplay** comes from the novel *Un de Baumugnes* by the Provençal writer Jean Giono, from whom Pagnol bought up the rights for five of his books. The change of title is a clear pointer to Pagnol's approach: his script shifts the emphasis on to the female character, the unfortunate Angèle. The dialogues are pure Pagnol, and the atmosphere in the film is also very different from that of the book.

**The situation on release of the film.** The film was shot on location in spring 1934, and was released in Marseille in September 1934. It was a box-office triumph in this city, partly because of its regionalist aspect, even though it does not really treat Marseille with kid gloves.

Where the film's themes are concerned, we shall confine ourselves to three comments on French society at the time.

First, in 1931 the French urban population overtook the rural population numerically; second, the state, the churches and a section of the press were expressing concern about falling birth rates (abortion had been strictly prohibited since 1920); and third, Frenchwomen did not yet have the vote (they did not obtain it until 1944), and married women were still incapable of entering into legal transactions (until the law of 13 February 1938). Consequently, they were subject to their husbands' authority, who exercised exclusive parental authority over them.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** A modest young woman living in a small Provençal village under the paternal authority of Maître Clarius. She is this farmer's daughter, the pretty, gentle Angèle. Clarius has also taken in and raised a foundling, a rather simple boy called Saturnin, who is absolutely devoted to Angèle.

However, Angèle is a little too naïve and is seduced by a roving musician. Expecting his child, she follows him to Marseille. Her unscrupulous seducer forces her to prostitute herself in the red-light district near the Vieux Port.

The brave Saturnin ventures into the big city and manages to track Angèle down and snatch her from the clutches of her procurer. However, once she is back in the farm Angèle comes up against her father's inflexible authority: in order to hush up this family scandal, the patriarch decides to shut up his daughter and her child in one of his cellars. She is supposed to live there in secret without any contact with the outside world.

Albin, a young shepherd from the village of Baumugnes, has long been in love with Angèle. He sends his friend, the old day labourer Amédée, to find out how she is by getting a job on Clarius' farm. Amédée proves a great help in starting up the farm again after years of neglect by Maître Clarius, who is embittered by grief. Amédée manages to find Angèle and tells Albin.

Albin comes to Angèle's cellar and alerts her to his presence by playing the mouth-organ. The young woman agrees to come with him. However, this is forgetting the anger of Clarius, who is ready to shoot both of them. Amédée intervenes and Albin pleads his cause: he manages to overcome the scruples of a father who had been reluctant to give away his dishonoured daughter to someone he knew to be a very decent young man.

**Choices and perspective.** It should be noted that despite the technical difficulties Pagnol wanted to get out of the studio to film on location on the scene of the action: he shot the film in an old farmhouse in an isolated valley in deepest Provence, which must have reminded him of his childhood. The whole crew experienced the collective adventure of filming in this isolated part of the countryside, where a makeshift camp had to be struck even before a single scene could be shot. This gives a strong ring of authenticity to the depiction of everyday life, even if the situations might seem quite melodramatic and the dialogue



too theatrical. Film historians were quick to point out that Pagnol’s approach made him one of the forerunners of Italian neo-realism.

The theme of the unmarried mother and the illegitimate child might seem rather outdated, but at the time Marcel Pagnol was literally obsessed with such figures, which he also examines in *Fanny* and *La fille du puisatier* (*The well-digger’s daughter*).

### *Suggestions for work*

#### 1. *Archaic rural France*

- The first step should be to go through the film pinpointing the images of rural life in Provence which the director has endeavoured to render realistic (bearing in mind the filming conditions). The housing conditions should be noted (the sparsely furnished, austere old farmhouse, the glimpsed villages), as should the agricultural landscapes (main crops, size of fields, state of roads and paths, water availability), equipment and methods.
- After this painstaking survey a spatiotemporal comparison should be conducted of the main information collected. At the spatial level: were there already signs that this rural community as filmed in 1934 was anachronistic, lagging behind other French (or European) regions or other Mediterranean areas? On the temporal front: what have been the main changes in such rural areas, from the demographic, economic and technological angles?
- We shall also discuss the objectivity of Marcel Pagnol’s filming techniques and the subjectivity of the audience’s perceptions. What type of image did the director prioritise and why? Does the contemporary viewer see the images in exactly the same way as the first audiences in Marseille in 1934? What kind of psychological filter is at play nowadays to make this virtually extinct world more attractive?
- What highly conventional contrast emerges from the film between the city and the countryside? Where does the despicable musician come from? What are the dangers of the big city? Is the city recognised as being emancipatory or as procuring any positive advantages? What contradictions can be established between this idealised view of the rural environment and the very real migrations that occurred in the 1930s? What advantages does the film attribute to the rural community? Are they indisputable?

#### 2. *The under-age “eternal feminine”, a victim of men’s selfish games*

- How much of the succession of misfortunes befalling Angèle is her own doing? What successive situations of submission does she accept? Attempts should be made to describe the chronology, circumstances and protagonists of each of these derelictions (docile under her father’s authority, enslaved by her lover, subjugated to men’s desires, etc.; but finally rescued by

Saturnin, punished and locked up by her father, tracked down by Amédée and rescued by Albin).

- What are the main weaknesses attributed to Angèle in the film? And what are her main fortes and assets? Why do they appear very conventional? Are they stereotypes of a male discourse on an “eternal” feminine nature?
- The status of unmarried mother: we should begin by delimiting the real dimensions of this phenomenon at the time in the absence of any efficacious contraception and with the difficulties of abortion, which was illegal and therefore clandestine and dangerous (a number of legislative references might be provided). Subsequently, we might analyse the reactions of the main protagonists in the film to Angèle’s pregnancy. Why does her father consider her conduct so reprehensible? Are there any other examples in literature and other films of such a severe social attitude? What is the ultimate implicit message of the film, and which of the protagonists appear to bear this message?
- Do you agree with the critics who have said that the film attempts to justify patriarchy? What are the good qualities of the Clarius character? What are his limitations and mistakes?

## Brief encounter by David Lean

*Great Britain, 1946, B/W, 86 min.*

*Themes: relations between men and women – clash between traditions and modern life – female emancipation – relationship with the child*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** David Lean (1908-91). *Brief encounter* was David Lean's first feature film. He began his film career as an editor, before working with Noël Coward in such patriotic propaganda films as *In which we serve*, 1942.

In the immediate post-war years David Lean established himself as one of the foremost British directors with his adaptations of famous Dickens novels (*Great expectations* and *Oliver Twist*). He emerged as the number one specialist in fine literary adaptations.

In the 1950s and 1960s he increasingly turned towards international blockbusters, in co-operation with the American film industry. *The bridge over the river Kwai*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago* were all shot during this period.

**The screenplay** is a Noël Coward adaptation of his play *Still life*, which had previously been a major hit in London. Note the double entendre in the title of the play. This very sound script was subsequently reused several times, particularly by the Italian director Vittorio de Sica in *Stazione termini*.

Celia Johnson skilfully portrays Laura Jesson and Trevor Howard plays the role of Doctor Alec Harvey.

**The situation on release of the film.** The film came out in autumn 1945, in a Europe just emerging from the war. It was an immediate hit in the United Kingdom and then in western Europe. Perhaps it really struck a chord because this dramatic and yet commonplace love story marked a return to the normalcy of peace, far from compulsory heroism (the only soldiers glimpsed are noisy drunks.). After years of collective striving, it also marked the right to return to the private sphere.

At the time it was seen as a fresh new non-conformist approach to romance, and one critic went so far as to declare that this was the first British film ever to have dealt with feelings and sexuality in an adult manner.

In spring 1946 the film was awarded the *Palme d'or* at the Cannes Festival, symbolising what is sometimes referred to as a “renaissance” in the British film industry.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** England, 1945: a young woman, Laura Jesson, leads an uneventful life with her two lovely children and a quiet, considerate husband whom she thinks she loves. The young woman has developed a number of habits in her well-ordered existence, and every Thursday she takes the train to the neighbouring town to do her shopping and relax a little. She goes to the library and then on to the cinema.

One Thursday everything changes: on the station platform she gets a speck of coal-dust in her eye. A stranger kindly offers his assistance: he is a general practitioner who visits the hospital every Thursday. His name is Alec Harvey.

The following Thursday they meet up again and spend the afternoon together. This is the beginning of a passionate relationship which is especially intense as both know that it is condemned in advance by social norms, and even more so by the strictness of their own upbringing and their conception of morality. The return to order in the family is effected at the cost of heartbreak and the pain of renunciation, which they must also refrain from showing for the sake of dignity and self-control.

It will be noted that the plot is helped along by a complex and skilful narrative technique: the film opens with the last few minutes the two lovers spend together over a cup of tea in the grimy station café where they are awaiting the trains that will separate them forever. This final tryst is interrupted by a vague acquaintance, whose irksome chattering ruins their last moments of happiness. Alec gets up to leave, simply squeezing Laura's shoulder slightly. This intruder has robbed them even of their farewell parting. This grotesque but moving scene is followed by Laura's despairing return home, where she resumes the false peace and quiet of the family circle on a dreary evening with her husband absorbed in the *Times* crossword: here begins a long, painful reminiscence, with a flashback over the excruciatingly brief encounter.

The voice-over narration by Laura provides the film with a tremendous emotional charge.

**Choices and perspective.** This film has remained the symbol of a high-quality British film industry in the post-second world war years. While some critics decided that such films were “a grey aesthetic promoting an ethic of resignation”, David Lean's work did manage to make a rather commonplace story firmly rooted in everyday life very moving, and almost lyrical. The use of Rachmaninov's piano concerto lends a high degree of pathos and nobility to certain scenes, while the fact of concentrating much of the action in the small railway station, its platforms, and particularly its café (which was where Noël

Coward's play was exclusively set) makes the film extremely realistic. The British critic John Russel Taylor, who drafted the preface for the film's publication in *Classic film scripts*, quite rightly notes that *Brief encounter* today constitutes an authentic documentary on a now-extinct lifestyle and moral code.

### *Suggestions for research work*

#### 1. *A nice orderly life*

- We might endeavour to pinpoint the social class to which the heroine belongs and the corresponding social habits. Does the film provide many details, or even any clues, as to the husband's activities? How would you describe their family life and living environment? An attempt should be made to estimate their standard of living in relation to their time (on the basis of the number of rooms, bathroom, type of furniture, household appliances, living-room decoration and the children's clothing). The very realistic scenery reconstituting Laura's house and simultaneously creating a "home sweet home"-type atmosphere should be described in detail.
- How does Laura's status as a housewife in a provincial town influence many of her habits and modes of behaviour? How much of her personal private life does she manage to preserve?
- Laura is a cinema enthusiast, but what is her favourite type of film? And to what kind of influence is she therefore exposed? Which media has now replaced the cinema in providing substitute dreams for housewives?
- The other female characters (Laura's acquaintances and the waitress in the station café): we might begin by defining them socially and then go on to analyse whether they place the Laura character in a negative or positive light by comparison.

#### 2. *The unexpected*

- What minor incident leads to the encounter? To what extent is it both very realistic (of almost documentary value to contemporary audiences) and highly symbolical?
- When does the young woman realise she will have to confront her feelings? Analyse her internal process of realisation as conveyed by the shooting script.

#### 3. *An impossible love? The weight of external constraints*

- The more fragile the love affair, the heavier the external pressure, which may be material in nature, partly linked to the contemporary standard of technical and economic development. Students should be alerted to this aspect: why is the main action of the film centred on a railway station? What influence do train timetables have in the dramatic construction of the plot? We might comment on the opening images of the film, where the stationmaster notes with a satisfied smile that an express train has passed on

time, thus emphasising its social symbolism. What, on the other hand, is the force of the car hire scene?

- The heaviest external pressure comes from other people's opinions. The most conclusive examples should be pinpointed. How does Laura deal with chance meetings of people she knows? She is trapped in the straitjacket of social conventions and exposed to the dangers of rumour.
  - How are we to interpret the husband's silence? Is it not some kind of particularly subtle pressure? Describe and comment on the concluding words and closing images of the film.
4. *An impossible love? The weight of moral principles*
- Which (inevitable and commonplace) features of their affair do Laura and Alec find impossible to accept? What is the source of their deep discomfort?
  - Why does their break-up become inevitable? In what ways are Laura and Alec clumsy (if clumsiness the right word)? How might we describe Alec's conduct in particular? How can we see that he is more moralistic than the young woman?
  - How does the film broach sexuality? What sexual images does it present? We should emphasise the restraint and sense of modesty of the film as compared with contemporary movies. Is this a case of self-censorship?
  - In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* the despairing heroine throws herself in front of a train, but this is, after all, a tale of Slav passion! Is Laura strongly tempted to commit suicide? Why does she not go through with it? The beautiful sequence where the young women, desperate and panic-stricken rushes towards the train station and stops on the edge of the platform, caught up in the whirlpool of an express train passing by, should be painstakingly analysed.
  - To what extent might we describe Laura as a victim of her upbringing? Do her acts and words bear the brand of the mandatory repression of emotion which was long the main criterion for bourgeois education (especially in Great Britain)? Some critics have called this film an archetype of British lower-middle-class morality: this assessment might be debated.
  - Does Alec give the impression of running away? Could Laura's renunciation be described as a noble sacrifice? What inkling does a study of the final sequence give us of her possible life after this heart-rending decision?

**Summary.** We can gauge the gulf between the values and lifestyles of this 1945 British society and those of contemporary societies. It might be useful to examine changes in legislation since 1945 in the family and marital fields.

## The loves of a blonde (Lasku Jedné plavoviesky) by Milos Forman

Czechoslovakia, 1965, B/W, 80 min.

*Themes: relations between men and women – clash between traditions and modern life – female emancipation*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Milos Forman, born in 1932, is perhaps the most brilliant of the glittering generation of Czechoslovak artists that emerged in the late 1960s. Right from his very first feature films (*Ace of spades*, *The loves of a blonde*, *The firemen's ball*) he established a very personal tone combining satire and light-hearted insolence which starkly contrasted with the standard academic type of production. This irreverent style sometimes comprises a subtle bitter-sweet flavour. He was one of the leading young Czech film-makers, but was forced into exile after the 1968 Soviet intervention. He moved to Hollywood, where he made a series of major films, such as *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* and *Amadeus*, the latter enabling him to return to Prague for the shooting. He is now one of the "safest bets" in the international film world.

**The screenplay.** Ivan Pásek and Jaroslav Papoušek worked with Milos Forman on the screenplay. Forman worked with very dense scripts comprising extremely detailed dialogues. However, he relied on his very fresh young actors, most of whom were non-professional, to capture strikingly realistic, truthful sequences. Milos Forman's first wife's sister plays the heroine of *The loves of a blonde*.

**The Czech New Wave.** This deliberate choice of amateur actors is the decisive factor setting Milos Forman and his friends Menzel, Nemeč and Chytilová aside from the mainstream film industry. These film-makers made a point of shooting on location, far from the studios, which put their non-professional actors at their ease.

Of course this New Wave quickly distanced itself from the official representational codes. Far from the positive heroes inherited from "socialist realism", they reinvented more human characters grappling with the difficulty of being. They denounced the defects in the regime with a timely irony, and conducted caustic analyses of the gloomy social reality on their doorsteps.

They quickly learned how to elude censorship and took advantage of the periods of relative cultural liberalisation in the mid-1960s. The repression of the Prague Spring put an end to this liberating cultural movement.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In the early 1960s in a small boring town near Prague, a children's shoe factory employs a large female workforce, most of whom are young local women living in hostels. They have virtually no recreational activities and boredom rules supreme: there are very few young men, and all the men they know are either married or old. In the hostel one evening the pretty young blonde Andula starts telling her friend about some of her old romances.

The factory boss finally realises that his workers do need a male presence: improving the morale of the troops would be good for productivity! He manages to persuade an army officer to conduct manoeuvres in the neighbourhood so that he can organise a grand public ball while the men are in the area. As it turns out, however, the soldiers are all rather unprepossessing reservists no longer in the full flush of youth! The encounter between these mature, unattractive men and the young female workers is a fiasco: the ball is a flop... fortunately there are the band members. Andula quickly spots a cute pianist, Milda. One night together, and maybe it's love.

Milda has to travel back to Prague, where he lives with his parents. Andula does not hesitate for one second: she leaves the hostel and the factory to join him. But once in Prague she comes up against his parents' authority and the forces of convention. Milda shows his true nature, which is not very heroic: he is in fact rather spineless. Andula decides to return to the factory, with a lot of illusions to get over.

**Choices and perspective.** In his second film, the defiant young director Milos Forman continues his critical and acerbic examination of the "socialist" society of his time, daring to stray from the official representations and slogans to deal sincerely with the sexual and emotional lives of young women, their desires and dreams, their illusions and self-deceptions. The film is a frequently bitter, realistic chronicle of the pettiness and shortcomings of provincial life, against a rather grey, suffocating social backdrop, but it is also a discreet appeal not to put up with it, not to become resigned to the prevailing mediocrity. For all her frustrations and disappointments Andula has at least tried to live, to escape a predetermined future, at the risk of deriving more hurt than happiness from her young loves.

### *Suggestions for research work*

1. *Women's condition in "socialist" society*
  - How does the director show the women's work in the factory? What is the difference between his approach and the innumerable propaganda documentaries on this subject? Which discrepancies does he highlight between the official slogans and day-to-day life in the factory? Maximum information should be sought on the working and living conditions shown or suggested by the images.



- How does the cinematographic work manage to evidence the routine and boredom experienced by the young women, both at work and in their hostels?
- For all its drawbacks, which advantages did this social organisation guarantee for the women?
- What are the interrelations among the young women and between them and their superiors? An analysis might be carried out of the strategy implemented by the (company or army) superiors *vis-à-vis* the female workforce.

2. *A women in search of happiness*

- Young Andula enjoys some degree of freedom. What is the main area in which she intends to be fully independent? How is the audience made aware of this? Was her relative sexual freedom common in the early 1960s? Does this freedom make her immune to sentimental illusions?
- The grand public ball fiasco: the sequence should be described, highlighting how the director transmits his ironic viewpoint not so much through the dialogue as by the picture-editing techniques (framing and assembly).
- The encounter and the first night: how does the director film these scenes? Does he use jump cuts, and if so where? How much audacity would it have taken to film even semi-nude scenes at the time? What is the sole purpose, more often than not, of eroticism in present-days films? To Forman, is the fact of filming an erotic scene not a political attack on the official puritanical line?

3. *Is the issue of contraception addressed in the film?*

- The film does deal with the generation gap. Here Milos Forman is exploring one of the taboo subjects of communist society: previously it would have been impossible to show anything but old people who like young people and young people who respect the wisdom and experience of their elders. What is Andula's approach to her lover's parents? How does her lover react to his parents' injunctions?
- Does the end of her illusions also mark the end of her hopes and dreams? What prospects are left open at the end of the film?



## A special day (Una giornata particolare) by Ettore Scola

*Italy, 1977, colour, 105 min.*

*Themes: relations between men and women – clash between traditions and modern life – female emancipation – relationship to a totalitarian society*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Ettore Scola is one of the symbolic directors of the golden age of Italian comedy. Born in 1931 in southern Italy, he was no stranger to poverty and exclusion as a child. After his arrival in Rome, he initially moved in journalistic circles and worked on reviews. He wrote for the radio before going into film scripts. In 1964 he received his first chance to direct. Italian comedy as a genre suited him down to the ground because he excels in combining critical social observation with vicious sarcasm: this was how he constructed some of his greatest hits, with *Drama of jealousy*, *Ugly, dirty and bad* and above all *We all loved each other so much*, in which the humour, though as savage as ever, is tinged with nostalgia.

*A special day* is a rather different film, aimed at both a subtle analysis of day-to-day fascism and a sensitive portrayal of an unusual romantic encounter.

**The screenplay.** The script was co-written by Ettore Scola, Ruggero Maccari and Maurizio Costanzo, originating in a joint plan to shoot a film on the fascist period. Ruggero Maccari had heard of a specific episode during the fascist repression when homosexuals were deported to a small Sardinian town: a radio presenter, Nunzio Filogamo, would never go anywhere without his certificate to the effect that he was not homosexual. This was where the story started. The three scriptwriters had the idea of incorporating this private tragedy into history writ large. Hitler's 1938 visit to Rome had been widely covered by the regime's newsreels, providing an ingenious foothold for their screenplay. Gradually, as they wrote, the Antonietta character took on an increasingly important role.

On its release in 1977 the film was an immediate box-office success, acclaimed by both the critics and the public in Italy and throughout Europe. It was well served by the tremendous performance of the two main actors, Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni, two giants of the Italian silver screen, who had not balked at this radical departure from their seductive images: he portrays a homosexual intellectual and she a tired, aging housewife.

The immense success of the film led to an adaptation for the theatre: the resultant play has been staged in several European and Latin American countries.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** 8 May 1938, Rome: a red-letter day for the fascist regime, which has organised sumptuous celebrations for the visit by its ally, Hitler. The whole population has to turn out to acclaim the two dictators. In a modern block of flats for regime employees and civil servants it is action stations from the crack of dawn: the whole family is getting ready for the great event. The mother, Antonietta, is the first to get up, and is busy preparing the coffee and then dressing the smallest of her swarm of kids.

When the flat finally empties, Antonietta remains on her own to finish the many household chores. It is on this special day that she will make the acquaintance of a man, who is also alone and relegated to the fringes of fascist society: he is Gabriel, a radio journalist, who is suspected by the regime because of his liberal ideas and his homosexuality and is living under house arrest.

Antonietta gets over her initial wariness and gradually begins to trust this gentle, soft-hearted man, who is so different from her boorish, brutal husband. Gabriel helps her with her housework, gradually she starts confiding in him, and an affectionate relationship develops. But this episode is only a fleeting ray of sunlight in a difficult life. After the grand parade the flat fills up again with a tired and noisy crowd.

**Choices and perspective.** It is important to grasp the dual significance of the film's chronology. While the director very subtly and sensitively reconstructs the environment of the late 1930s in terms not only of day-to-day life but also, and above all, of mental attitudes, it is also true that the central questions raised in the film, namely the status of women and the recognition of homosexuals in or their exclusion from society, are issues that are more germane to the heated debate that swept across Italy and western Europe at the beginning of the 1970s.

### *Suggestions for research*

1. *The weight of historical circumstances*
  - A special analysis is needed of the opening sequence of the film: questions about the nature of this “documentary” should pinpoint the duality of the images (black and white pictures from fascist newsreels and the changeover to colour for the fictional part of the film) and their different temporal settings. Straightforward but highly specific questions (such as what dates and places are given by the voice-over to the newsreel pictures? Which historical personalities are presented? What is the ostensible reason for the visit, etc.) should be used to present the historical context.
  - The next step is to home in on the type of urban architecture captured by the camera, possibly comparing the images with documents from textbooks

or elsewhere. This architecture has a social significance: it is also partly an instrument for day-to-day fascism: why? In what ways can it encourage social control? Which character has a potential role in such control? Encourage discussion of the grand gateway, the role of the concierge and collective opinions. To which social classes do most of the inhabitants of the block belong?

## 2. *Family constraints*

- What is the family's likely social situation? Even though it is not explicitly stated, there are many clues to the father's occupation and hints as to the family's standard of living: the number of rooms, availability of a bathroom, type of furniture, household appliances, children's clothing, all these items can be registered and compared with documents from the late 1930s (beware of possible anachronistic representations on the part of students: a lack of household appliances is not a sign of poverty in the 1930s, while the presence of a bathroom with hot and cold running water is almost a luxury).
- How many children are there in this family? What visual gag peculiar to films is used to heighten the audience's surprise? Was high female fertility exceptional in pre-war Italy? What about nowadays? Try to encourage discussion of these phenomena.
- Who is the first family member to rise in the morning? Why does she not go to the grand public ceremony? List all the chores mentioned or shown in the film. Is their any division of labour with the children – the girls, the boys? – the husband?
- With whom does the husband identify, and why? Pinpoint his character traits as they emerge from his conduct and his words. More generally, what information can be gleaned from the predominant ideas of the fascist period as disseminated on a daily basis, regarding gender relations, family relations and exaltation of nationalism. What kinds of family and social pressure are used to promote conformity?

## 3. *A submissive woman awakening to self-awareness*

The lovely Antonietta character is extraordinarily ably and subtly portrayed by Sofia Loren. This might lead students to discuss the profession of actress, which has been warped by media caricatures: for which major female roles was Sophia Loren mainly famous in the 1950s and 1960s, in both Italy and Hollywood? Why is this part as a mother assigned by Ettore Scola novel for her? What risks did she run in accepting it?

Analysis of the film's presentation of the Antonietta character might focus on three main parameters.

First, her apparent conformity and submission to the established order, which are sometimes accompanied by outbursts of anger and fits of the blues. How does the film convey the full extent of her household chores? What are her real rela-

tions with her husband? Is she fooled by his behaviour? Does she despise him? With which of her children does she have good relations? Why?

Second, her escape into a kind of dream or fantasy world. To what extent are many of these dreams artificial, mainly tailor-made by social conditioning? For instance, what is the role of the radio, which is frequently heard in the background? Close scrutiny is required of Antonietta's fascination for *Il Duce*, an emblem of triumphant masculinity. Ettore Scola is here drawing on a well-documented phenomenon in fascist Italy, namely the widespread adulation by Italian women of the charmer Mussolini.

Last, her discovery of the possibility of different relations, with a man who is different: the possibility of dialoguing and being heard and understood. The possibility of being treated as an equal, with respect. The possibility of expressing her desire, instead of always submitting to male desire.

In the final analysis, the film launches a veritable debate on the female and male identities by forcing the audience to overcome any possible stereotyping. In what way does this make the film an eye-opener on the intellectual and social preoccupations of the 1970s?

## The bride (Gelin) by Lütfi Omer Akad

Turkey, 1973, colour, 97 min.

*Themes: relations between men and women – clash between traditions and modern life – female emancipation – relationship with children – relationship to religion – rural depopulation.*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Lütfi Omer Akad was born in Istanbul in 1916. Over his film-making life, from the mid-1940s to the late 1970s, Lütfi Akad made just under 50 fictional feature films. Although he is not well known in western Europe, he is recognised in his country as one of the founding fathers of Turkish cinema and enjoys undeniable prestige and influence.

Lütfi Akad began his professional career as an accountant, later becoming a production manager. In 1949 he made his first film, *Strike down the harlot*, which already demonstrated his sense of the film narrative, breaking away from the old theatrical school. However, he asserts himself even more with his determined social realism and his fraternal, lucid and affectionate view of the humble and oppressed.

Lütfi Akad was a particularly interesting film-maker who was well ahead of his time, and his humanistic films present many beautiful portraits of noble and courageous women opposing the constraints of social structures inherited from the past and the straitjackets of archaic customs. His wide range of films include *The mother* and *My beloved streetwalker*.

In 1973 Lütfi Akad began work on a major social panorama of the most acute problems facing modern Turkey: rural depopulation, mental uprooting and integration into town and city life are the burning issues addressed in three outstanding films, *The bride*, *The wedding* and *The debt*. Each of these films devotes particular attention to the female characters.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** *The bride* is one of the films in this trilogy to which Lütfi attached particular importance, alongside *The wedding* (1974) and *The debt* (1975). Each of the three films takes a different angle on the cultural and physical shock experienced by peasant families arriving in the big city.

The plot of *Gelin* centres on the distressing experience of a young woman. When Meryem and her husband arrive in Istanbul with their young child they have no choice but to stay with the in-laws, the Haci Ilias family, who arrived there a few months previously. The father-in-law is a veritable patriarch attached to the quasi-feudal structure of his “clan”, and has invested their collective fortune in a small shop in a destitute neighbourhood of Istanbul, a place which receives the flotsam and broken dreams of uprooted country people.

The whole family works hard in the little shop, and business is not too bad. So the head of the family rashly decides to take out large loans to open a bigger, more modern shop in a more fashionable area. This involves a great deal of sacrifice, in an atmosphere of stubbornness mixed with ignorance, obscurantism and religious superstition.

Meryem’s little boy falls seriously ill, and his condition necessitates costly treatment. The young woman bravely tries to convince her family-in-law of the urgency of the situation. But money is scarce, and what funds there are have been earmarked for the father-in-law’s plans. When the Feast of the Sacrifice comes around, the patriarch is absolutely determined to respect the expensive religious tradition, to the detriment of the child’s treatment. The Sacrifice goes ahead, but this time there are two victims.

In despair and revolt, Meryem leaves the family and finds a job in a factory. Instead of seeing this as a dishonour and wreaking vengeance for his wife’s departure, the husband realises what has happened and eventually joins her for a conjugal life at last freed from all constraints.

**Choices and perspective.** The film describes with lucidity and dignity the itinerary of a young woman, the bride, who fights for herself and her loved ones within this “clan” absorbed with its frenetic efforts to succeed in the big city. The bride goes through a long painful awakening to the fact that ignorance and narrow-minded respect for traditions can be criminal and certain religious practices can be mere hypocritical facades, barely concealing callousness and money-grabbing greed.

Lütfi Akad offers us here one of his best films, which with time has taken on an amazing documentary force without losing any of its emotional power. It was shot almost exclusively with a fixed camera in keeping, as Akad put it, with Turkish male sobriety, adopting a quasi-documentary style.

#### *Suggestions for research*

1. *Difficulties of migrating to the city*
  - For many European students the Turkish example of such migration, which is probably the most recent, could be a starting-point for re-examining the massive drift from the land throughout Europe since the 19th century: the flight from Brittany and Auvergne to Paris, from Calabria to Lombardy,



from Ireland to London, etc. Before extending to other countries, migration in Europe was at first confined to the national level.

- Are the family’s geographical origins mentioned? What are they? Which city and district were chosen for their new home? Why?
- How are the main difficulties of everyday life presented? The family is poor but not destitute. What is the basis for their great expectations at the beginning of the narrative? There are some fairly comical scenes when the new shop is opened: what amusing incident illustrates an important contrast?
- What does the father-in-law endeavour to preserve in the urban environment? How can this preservation of traditions serve his economic interests? How much courage would it have taken to make his film in the 1970s? Is it not an even more courageous film seen from today’s perspective?

## 2. *A woman’s courage*

- We should note the many tokens of goodwill (or should we say “submission”?) given by Meryem to a family into which she would like to integrate as far as possible. Housework occupies an important position. The director pays great attention to day-to-day actions and his way of filming shows his insight into their simple beauty. A number of indicative shots might be pinpointed, for example the kitchen scenes. The household chores might be listed: to what extent do they constitute a veritable unpaid economic activity? But do they not have a more important significance, especially for the daughter-in-law?
- Her attitude to her parents-in-law and her husband: what signs of respect and obedience does Meryem show? How does this attitude change? What are the reasons for Meryem’s sudden awakening? Why does she nonetheless delay in seeking confrontation?
- The Biblical origin of the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice should be explained. Why is a sheep sacrificed? Whom did the animal replace in the original story? Why is this sacrifice particularly charged with meaning in the film? Is the film hostile to religious belief? What kind of attitude does it criticise?
- What does Meryem resolve to do after her child’s death? How are we to assess her reasons for this step? How could the fact of becoming an industrial worker be considered as emancipation at the time? Is Meryem’s desire for independence reflected in her image on the screen (dress, attitude, acting, etc.)?

**Summary.** Summarise all the above comments in order to bring out the main points in the film.



## Protest and revolt

### The shameless old lady (La vieille dame indigne) by René Allio

*France, 1965, B/W, 88 min.*

*Themes: relations between generations – relations between men and women – the clash between tradition and modernity – women's emancipation*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** René Allio (born in Marseille in 1924, died 1995) made a name as a set painter and decorator in the theatre, in particular working with Roger Planchon at the Théâtre de la Cité. This was probably where he gained a deep knowledge of the work and theories of Bertolt Brecht, which influenced his approach to direction throughout his career.

He turned to the cinema in 1963, making a number of short films. His first full-length feature in 1965 was a genuine masterstroke: *The shameless old lady* was unanimously acclaimed by the critics. But at the same time, he was confined to making what soon came to be termed “non-commercial” films. Despite difficulties in finding funds, he managed to make films on a regular basis and had a number of great successes with intelligent, historical films which were inspired by the work of what is known as the “New History”. Landmark films of this genre are *Les camisards* (unofficial English title: *The Camisards*) and *Moi, Pierre Rivière...* (unofficial English title: *I, Pierre Rivière...*), which was written in collaboration with Michel Foucault.

René Allio was to turn his taste for history to magnificent use, making a number of films for television, such as *Un médecin des Lumières* (unofficial English title: *A doctor of enlightenment*). Returning to Marseille, the town of his birth, he devoted his energy to regional creativity, continually keeping a well-informed eye on the social problems of his time. As a film-maker, he belongs in a category all of his own, initially inspired by the ideas of the New Wave but going on to develop a very personal style.

**The screenplay** was adapted by René Allio from a short story by Bertolt Brecht published in *Tales from the calendar*. Although he takes great liberties in transposing the facts, René Allio strives to preserve the spirit of this Brechtian lesson by adopting “a narrative method which, at every instant, seeks to give the audience the freedom to judge for themselves”. The music and songs of Jean Ferrat underline, punctuate and comment on the action.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In Marseille, at the beginning of the 1960s, Mme Berthe is left on her own following the death of her husband. But above all, this new solitude brings her new freedom. She is no longer tied down and her small pension, though not a fantastic amount, caters for her needs. She turns her back on family commitments and marvels at the thousands of simple joys in life; she discovers the world that her duties and family responsibilities have always hidden from her. She wanders around the shops, discovering the pleasures of buying things for herself simply because she feels like it. With charming consciousness of her appearance, she learns how to make herself pretty again. Much to her conservative children's annoyance, she makes friends with two younger people who have freer moral attitudes, are more carefree and enjoy life: Rosalie, a saucy waitress, and Alphonse, a likeable cobbler. Together, they buy a car, a Citroën 2CV and go to Toulon for a holiday. She dies two years later, having at last known her first months of true happiness.

**Choices and perspective.** The film describes a peaceful revolt without slipping into sentimentality: anyone at any age can set off on the paths of freedom, often in unexpected ways. The tenderly libertarian story is well served by the talents of an elderly actress: Sylvie (the stage name of Louise Pauline Mainguéné) was 82 when she agreed to appear in René Allio's film. This marvellous old lady of the French cinema had begun her career in silent movies and appeared in over fifty films. Her most striking performances were as the vengeful mother in *The raven (Le corbeau)* and the fierce, paralysed Madame Raquin in *Thérèse Raquin*.

Her unforgettable performance in *The shameless old lady* should be noted and analysed. This should enable adolescent students to challenge stereotyped conceptions of the status of film actresses. They will discover an unknown old lady, far removed from Hollywood fantasies over "stars", who are inevitably thought of as being young and glamorous. And yet Sylvie is an excellent actress who follows the director's indications intelligently while contributing a large degree of her own sensitivity.

### *Suggestions for research*

1. *The "old lady's" past life: spent serving others, in self-negation?*
  - The film opens with the death of Berthe's husband and little is actually said about their married life. Using the clues given in the film, try to reconstruct an outline of their lives. For example, a chronology could be made of their probable dates of birth, marriage and their children's and grandchildren's probable dates of birth. It would be interesting to match these dates with historical events. How were their lives conditioned by the economic and social circumstances of their time?

- What reasons are there for saying that the old lady has not really had a life of her own? In what ways does her particular case reflect the general status of women in the times and social environments that have been identified? Could René Allio have written a similar scenario based on a male character? In what other ways were working-class women alienated?
2. *A new taste for life*
- The death of Berthe’s husband gives her an opportunity for completely new independence. (However, certain economic conditions were necessary for this: what were they? Elderly persons from modest backgrounds were the largest group not to benefit from the economic growth of the 1960s.) How, in the various sequences, is this independence reflected in Berthe’s lifestyle, buying habits, family relationships, etc.?
  - Is it true to say that the simple pleasures enjoyed by the old lady are often connected with certain ways of spending that were hitherto unknown to her? How does ownership of a car come across as an instrument of freedom in the film? What is the purpose of the holiday jaunt? Try to relate Berthe’s new experiences to the great sociological changes that took place in the 1960s.
3. *How other people see the old lady*
- The old lady’s “extraordinary” behaviour (the film’s title should be explained) often provokes hostile reactions: describe these reactions and give reasons for them. Particular attention should be paid to analysing the opposition of Berthe’s family, distinguishing between mere pretexts and deeper motives. In contrast, how are her new friends depicted? How old are they and what is their social background? In what way are these encounters and friendships surprising?
4. *Cinéma vérité?*
- Comment on some of the cinematographic techniques which are used to give certain sequences in the film a documentary-like realism. At the same time, study the mechanics of the storyline and Sylvie’s portrayal of the main character.



## Daisies (Sedmikrasky) by Vera Chytilová

Czechoslovakia, 1966, colour, 76 min.

*Themes: relations between men and women – the generation gap – rebellious youth – women's emancipation*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Vera Chytilová was born in Ostrava in 1929. After studying philosophy and architecture, she worked as a designer. Her beauty opened up a career as a model, which brought her into contact with the world of cinema. In 1957, she started a five-year course at the famous Prague film school, the Famu, where she was the only woman. Her first attempts at direction and the film she made for her final exams drew much attention. She was already interested in the conditions of women in all its forms, as shown in *Something different (O necem jinem)*, in which she ironically compares the life of a housewife with that of a top-level athlete.

She was one of the co-directors of *Pearls of the deep (Perlicky na dne)*, the film manifesto of the Czech New Wave, in which she set aside realist cinema for a political fable blended with biting farce.

In 1966, with the support of costume designer and screenwriter Ester Krumbachová, she made *Daisies*, a portrait of two irreverent and irresponsible young women who see life as a great game which has no moral purpose.

After 1968, Vera Chytilová's cheerful nihilism was openly disapproved by the regime and, as a result, she was reduced to artistic silence for seven long years. In 1976, *The apple game (Hra o jablko)* once again aroused the authorities' hostility, but won the Grand Prix at the 1978 Chamrousse Festival of Comedy Films. Towards the end of the 1980s, she was finally allowed back to the studios, where she has since alternated between fiction films and documentaries.

A controversial and uncompromising figure, her feminism lays the emphasis on intelligence rather than sensitivity. She likes independent, clear-cut and original opinions, once saying "I don't understand people who disagree and yet keep quiet". To her, passion is an empty and illusory concept.

**The screenplay** was written by Vera Chytilová with Pavel Juracek and Ester Krumbachová, screenwriter and set designer. Although the ideas of the three artistes differed in a number of areas, their collaboration in creating this insolent

parable was exemplary. Although Ester Krumbachová was not as aggressive or provocative as Vera Chytilová, her humour was edged with bitter irony. Pavel Juracek, a rebellious and clear-sighted man, was skilled in revealing the stupidity and petty acts of cowardice of his contemporaries, whom he stigmatised with a certain cruelty.

The film won the Grand Prix at the 1967 Bergamo Film Festival.

### **An unusual, creative context as part of the Czech New Wave of the 1960s.**

Vera Chytilová and her co-scriptwriters belong to a generation of dazzling young film-makers, which included such exceptional talents as Milos Forman, Jiri Menzel and Jaromil Jireš and is considered today to represent a “golden age”. Almost all of them studied at the Famu. The Prague film school, whose importance can never be overstated, gave them an excellent knowledge of cinematographic techniques. But in that period, it was first and foremost a place where these young film-makers, who were weary of the intellectual stagnation that prevailed under the “socialist” regime, could meet and express themselves freely. They used humour and impertinence as weapons against hollow, meaningless ideals and official lies and replaced false objectivity with avowed subjectivity. This New Wave stood above all for individual expression and soon broke away from the official codes of portrayal. Far from the positive heroes that were the legacy of “social realism”, these young film-makers reinvented more human characters who struggled with the difficulty of simply existing. This unique context should not be forgotten if we are to help the sometimes blasé students of today appreciate the tremendous liberating energy radiated by the anarchistic provocations of the two “little brats” in Vera Chytilová’s film. As a result, the drab social reality is unmasked and all of the regime’s pseudo-realist imagery crumbles away. That this libertarian spirit is spread by two young women is obviously highly significant in a film by the first Czech woman film-maker.

It should be pointed out that the narrative had to trick state censorship, which, although more relaxed, was still operating at the time. The events shown in the film may appear excessive and outrageous, but this is because it functions as a parable in which excessive clowning is used as a means of confounding the vigilance of the censors. The repression of the Prague Spring put an end to this emancipating cultural movement.

### **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Two young women, Mary I and Mary II, of whose past we are told nothing, will do anything to fill the vacuum of their lives. They are deliberately provocative, unkind and even cruel just for fun. At the swimming pool and in bars and nightclubs, they tantalise men only to ridicule them and make them suffer. The hostile and reproving looks of the people around them are the only things that make them feel really alive.



The sole explanation for their behaviour is summed up in the few words they exchange at the beginning of each episode: “Does it matter?” “No, it doesn’t matter!”

Following a mad string of irresponsible acts, they end up in a hall where a table has been spread for a banquet. They savagely devour the food, dirtying everything and ransacking the room, finally swinging from the chandelier.

They fall through an open window into a river, and have to call for help. They respond to their rescuers’ reproaches by promising to be good!

The director’s taste for provocation is obvious, but the film, borne along by a devastating and liberating humour, is too funny to be nihilistic.

### *Suggestions for research*

#### 1. *Odious, anti-social young women?*

- Draw up a list of the two Marys’ misdeeds, distinguishing between simple “mischief” and more perverse, deliberate attempts to do harm. Does the director try to make her two “heroines” likeable? Why is the audience given so few details of their past or their family and social backgrounds? It would be interesting to compare Vera Chytilová’s detached, uninvolved approach with the formulas commonly used in modern Hollywood productions, which try to get viewers to sympathise or even identify with the main characters.

#### 2. *Their destruction of social propriety and appearances*

- Who are the main victims of the two Marys’ provocation? In what way are they largely responsible for what happens to them? Can the audience really take pity on them? What, unfortunately frequent, situations are reversed in this way? What implicit domination do the two women challenge?
- The conservatism of Czech society takes a beating in the film: what habits and social rituals are shown in the various sequences? How are they torn to shreds by the behaviour of the two young women? Special attention should be paid to the banquet scene: why is the ransacking of the hall, and especially the havoc created with the food, particularly scandalous?

#### 3. *Are people right to revolt?*

- Some teachers today, who constantly have to fight the rudeness and provocative behaviour of certain students, may be surprised by the film, which, despite the years that have passed, retains much of its anarchic impertinence. Yet this should provide an opportunity for discussing such adolescent behaviour, which only takes on a liberating meaning in specific political and economic contexts, but which can also be the amplified symptom of painful existential questioning awkwardly expressed under cover of a “couldn’t-care-less attitude”. “Does it matter? No, it doesn’t matter!”



## The marriage of Maria Braun (Die Ehe der Maria Braun) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*West Germany, 1979, colour, 120 min.*

*Themes: relations between men and women – the clash between tradition and modernity – women’s emancipation*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-82) was undoubtedly the most forceful, skilful, subversive and controversial of the young generation of German film-makers which came to the fore at the end of the 1960s.

We know that this child of the post-war period had a difficult adolescence: his parents were divorced and his father gave him the responsibility of managing the bedsits he let to immigrants, a task which introduced the young Fassbinder to this difficult, marginal world that was to fascinate him. It was there that he had his first homosexual experience, which caused a scandal at the time. He tried his hand at umpteen jobs, including a little journalism and stage acting.

In 1967, he joined the innovating Action-Theater troupe as an actor before turning to direction and writing his first play, *Katzelmacher*. But in 1968, along with other members of the troupe, including Hanna Schygulla, he founded the Antitheater company. He then went into film-making. In 1970, he started his own production company and in the years that followed did work for television and made other films, shooting very often and very quickly in accordance with one of his own maxims, “Do a lot of things rather than great things”. His whole existence was to be a bout of feverish activity, making 39 films despite the fact that his private life was constantly disrupted by his drug addiction and ravaged by emotional conflicts. His premature death in 1982 was undoubtedly linked with these exhausting excesses.

In his first films, Fassbinder was relentless in his spiteful description of the underside of a prosperous and successful Germany, endeavouring to depict those who were excluded from the affluent and conservative society that he hated: homosexuals, prostitutes, immigrant workers, failures of all sorts and misfits. The character of Maria Braun, who is driven by tremendous energy and determination to succeed at all costs, therefore seems to herald a new direction. But the end of the film is nevertheless bitter.

**The screenplay** was based on a book by Gerhard Zwerenz. Fassbinder worked hard on it in collaboration with Peter Marthesheimer and Pia Froelich, and wrote all the dialogues.

**Public reaction.** Whereas Fassbinder's first films had met with a mixed critical reaction and had only achieved recognition by an audience of cinephiles and anti-establishment intellectuals, *The marriage of Maria Braun* enjoyed huge popular success in Germany and, later, throughout Europe.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Germany in 1943, during the air raids. Maria marries Hermann, who has to leave for the war immediately after the wedding. When he fails to return in 1945, she sets out to find him, convinced that he is still alive. Life is very difficult in this post-war Germany. Maria lives with her mother and grandfather, deals in the black market and becomes a hostess in a bar for American soldiers. There she meets Bill, a black soldier with whom she has an affair. She becomes pregnant by him but refuses to marry him. One evening when she is with Bill, Hermann reappears. In the confusion that follows, Maria hits Bill with a bottle, killing him. Hermann takes the blame in her place and goes to prison.

In a train, Maria makes the acquaintance of Oswald, an industrialist who has just retaken charge of the company he had had to leave during the war. Seduced by her personality, her beauty and her hunger for success, he hires her as his assistant. She soon becomes his indispensable right hand, an efficient business-woman. She consents to having an affair with him on condition that she retains her independence. She continues to visit Hermann in prison.

Oswald, who is incurably ill, makes a pact with Hermann: he will leave him half his fortune if he agrees to give Maria up for as long as Oswald remains alive. Hermann accepts the offer and disappears when, unexpectedly to Maria, he is released early from prison.

On hearing of Oswald's death, Maria drinks a great deal. When Hermann turns up, he finds her drunk. The radio is broadcasting the 1954 World Cup final between Germany and Hungary. Maria tries to seduce once again the man who has never ceased to be her husband. Distracted by emotion, she blows out the flame of the gas cooker. Tragic death comes with the last cigarette.

*Suggestions for research: the life of a typical German woman*

- 1945, a world of lonely women. How does the director emphasise both the physical absence and implied presence of men (photographs on furniture, memories, radio announcements, etc.)? In what way does masculine authority remain a reference? How is it identified with the home to which all women aspire?
- Women's role is still traditional. Identify the components of a woman's identity which remains closely linked with the home and domesticity. A

study of Maria's mother is particularly revealing in this respect. What areas is she confined to? What are her relations with the outside world? What, by their own admission, are women able to do? In what ways do they portray the perfect housewives that Hitler's Germany wanted them to be?

- Does the hardship of the times offer a chance for change? What hard and strenuous tasks do women have to accept? How do the women in general, and Maria in particular, adapt their practical-mindedness to their will to survive? Explain how bartering and exchanging services make it possible to recreate effective economic circuits. Above all, the urgency of the situation leads to many traditional values being challenged. Identify the various sequences in which cultural, patriotic and even emotional values are subverted or repressed: uneasy consciences are superfluous when sentimental memories must be used as bargaining counters.
- Are the women sentenced to freedom? Why is it possible to use this expression? At the same time, what means – reputedly specifically feminine – do Maria and her friends use to succeed? What are often, when it boils down to it, their final trump cards? Can we speak of real emancipation when it comes to their relations with men?
- Are successful careers and climbing the social ladder the true key to women's liberation? What skills does Maria employ in the company? Is she hampered by her lack of technical knowledge? How does she compensate for her ignorance in this field? What instruments of power does she manage to seize and master (for example, she learns English, the language of the victors)? Special attention should be paid to Maria's attitude towards money.



## Rosa Luxemburg by Margarethe von Trotta

*West Germany, 1986, colour, 122 min.*

*Themes: relations between men and women – women’s emancipation – revolution – political struggles – commitment to women’s cause*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Margarethe von Trotta was born in Berlin in 1942. In 1964, after studying literature and languages in Munich and Paris, she became an actress, first in the theatre and then in the cinema. There she met the leading new German film directors, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff, with whom she co-directed her first film, *The lost honour of Katharina Blum* (*Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*), in 1975. She gained international recognition in 1981 with *The German sisters* (*Die bleierne Zeit*, alternatively entitled *Marianne and Juliane*), which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. She is a free thinker, critical of the German society of her time, who became a high-profile militant feminist at the beginning of the 1980s.

**The screenplay.** When Fassbinder died in 1982, he had begun work on a film on Rosa Luxemburg. The producer offered the near-completed script to Margarethe von Trotta, but she agreed to direct the film on condition that she could rework the screenplay. She spent nearly a year and a half on research and documentation. As a result the film is given a serious, well-documented approach, but it is also a tribute to an endearing person, with whom the director obviously soon empathised.

**The context at the time of release.** The film was covered widely in the German press when it was released in April 1986. Significantly, all the articles gave a detailed account of the historical character. This concern to inform and educate the German public (the major weekly magazine *Die Zeit* devoted a special supplement to von Trotta’s film!) can be seen as an indication of its ignorance and the failings of the education system. By implication, this justifies the director’s decision to shed full light on a figure and events that had long been masked. Margarethe von Trotta was dealing with a crucial period that was deeply buried in the nation’s collective consciousness. Rosa Luxemburg had been all but forgotten in West Germany and recognised, but distorted and used as a tool, in East Germany. When the film was released, a section of German youth was undoubtedly able to gauge Rosa Luxemburg more accurately. This new curiosity even prompted the publication of new editions of her writings, which had previously been difficult to find.

Given the concerns and discussions of the 1980s, it was only natural that renewed interest should be shown in the life and story of Rosa Luxemburg. In 1986, West Germany was just emerging from the “leaden time” (the film’s German title) of ultra-leftwing terrorism, which had discredited a certain idea of revolutionary activism. The country was facing the “Euromissiles” crisis, with the Greens and other alternative political groups advocating outright pacifism. The rapidly growing feminist movements were opening up new vistas for the future. As we shall see, the story told in the film echoed this questioning.

The French film press was more critical of *Rosa Luxemburg*, finding the direction too austere and academic. However, Barbara Sukowa, an actress of Polish extraction, was acclaimed for her moving portrayal of a woman she identified with. She received the award for Best Actress at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The story is set in 1916, as the first world war rages. Rosa Luxemburg, a revolutionary who has been prosecuted for spreading pacifist propaganda, is imprisoned in Wronke fortress. Far from despairing, this small, energetic woman, whose political ideals have led to previous prison sentences, is incredibly active: she reads, studies theories, translates and writes profusely. The film uses elaborate cutting techniques to incorporate numerous flashbacks, all introduced by Rosa’s voice reading letters that she has either received or is in the course of writing. Through these scenes from the past, we discover the life of this Polish Jewess, who obtained German nationality through her marriage in 1898. The most important episodes of Rosa’s public life are depicted: her first arrest in Warsaw in 1906, her clashes with the leaders of the German social democratic movement, workers’ meetings and her fierce but vain struggle to save peace and prevent war in 1914. But there are also all too brief moments of happiness and tranquillity: her romance with Kostya Zertkin and her walks along the shores of Lake Garda with her friend Luise Kautsky. The last part of the film shows Rosa’s tragic destiny, from her release from prison in November 1918 to her murder by irregular soldiers in Berlin on 15 January 1919.

**Choices and perspective.** “If Rosa Luxemburg had been merely a woman politician, she would not have interested me. What I liked about her was that she was a rounded woman. She was a woman who wanted to take part in the political struggle and also find love. A warm-hearted woman, a talented writer, a woman who loved nature and animals; a woman whose political ideas were not theoretical, but something she put into practice in her everyday life; a woman who hated compromise in both her private life and her political commitment. The consequence of this intransigence was to be solitude. I saw that she had the same problems as women today, who want to have successful private lives and careers.” (Margarethe von Trotta)<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Contreplongée*, special issue on Rosa Luxemburg, ed. Rencontres Cinématographiques d’Alsace, 1987.



*Suggestions for research: a political and moral portrait of an exceptional woman*

Although the film portrays Rosa as a major socialist and pacifist theorist, who pays for her fight for her ideas with her freedom and, finally, her life, it should be noted that these ideas are only barely sketched out. A film was clearly not the ideal medium for dealing with the complex debate that rocked German social democracy at the beginning of the century. The political analysis is no more than superficial, and the director concentrates more on describing Rosa's actions and relationships than on explaining the ideological challenges (these could be the subject of supplementary research).

As shown by the above quotation, the director, with warmth and fellow feeling, painted a portrait of a woman, emphasising the conflict that often exists between private life and militant action. Is there a mutilating aspect to militant action in that it prevents people from blossoming in full and prevents them from living normal everyday lives? It should be stressed that this is an issue which greatly preoccupied the generation of European women which emerged from the social movements of the end of the 1960s and to which Margarethe von Trotta belongs. This is the aspect of the film on which the most relevant analytical work could be carried out.

1. *A professional revolutionary, a woman both gentle and strong*
  - How are Rosa's relations with the leaders of the German social democratic movement depicted?
  - What aspect of Rosa Luxemburg's political activities is emphasised? (For example, in the way in which scenes showing certain political meetings are directed). In what way does this reflect the concerns of the 1980s?
  - How does Rosa react to her imprisonment? How does she establish links with one of her warders? How does she draw new energy from her love of nature? (She grows plants from seed and feeds the birds). Can these sequences be seen as a metaphor for revolutionary hopes?
  - Rosa's relationships with men, in particular Leo Jogiches: how is he shown to be a despotic lover with whom Rosa has to struggle to preserve her freedom of thought and action? What contradictions is she forced to accept?
  - In what way are her hopes for happiness and her ability to seize fleeting moments of it depicted?
  - What does she reproach the young Kostya Zetkin with? Is this at odds with her own commitment?
2. *A woman with a tragic destiny. This work could be based on an analysis of three sequences: the opening sequence, the mock execution and its repeat at the end of the film.*
  - The opening sequence: analyse the techniques employed by the director – guards filmed from a low-angle; the emphasis given to the scene by the

tilted shot; the dark, hazy, slim silhouette; the bareness of the set; the use of a dark palette of colours, which together paint a picture of solitude, weakness and failure. How, in spite of all this, does Rosa's voice-over introduce a note of hope?

- The mock execution: the scene showing the descent of the staircase is one of the strongest because of the care taken by the director to appeal to the audience's emotions. Note the overlay of ingredients of horror: the black blindfold, the noise made by the boots, etc. What special significance does this give Rosa's limp, an infirmity that is bluntly focused on? How does her fall symbolise her vulnerability?
- Rosa's murder. Describe the circumstances of her execution as filmed by von Trotta. What aspects of the set are similar to that of the mock execution sequence? What can be said about the name of the hotel? This time, Rosa's fall is no accident. In what way is the film, to use the director's expression, "a requiem for a dead woman"?

## Little Vera (Malenkaya Vera) by Vasili Pichul

*Soviet Union, 1989, colour, 130 min.*

*Themes: relations between men and women – the clash between tradition and modernity – women’s emancipation – conflicts between generations – rebellion against the social order*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Russian director Vasili Pichul (born in 1961) was unknown before the incredible success of *Little Vera*, whose caustic script was written by Maria Khmelik. Thanks to the comfortable profits brought in by this low-budget film, Pichul was able to found a private production co-operative and make three more films during the 1990s, including *Idiot dreams (Mechty idiota)* and *The sky with diamonds (Un ciel parsemé de diamants)*. The films that followed *Little Vera* showed Pichul to be a true film-maker who tackled a wide range of subjects and refused to stick to a tried and successful formula.

**The context at the time of release.** The film is emblematic of the period of cultural and social emancipation that began with Gorbachev’s policy of transparency, glasnost. The film, made in 1988, was banned for almost six months. When its release was authorised, there was a surge of curiosity among the Soviet public – more than 45 million people went to see it in a few weeks – as if the film, arriving at just the right moment, crystallised the hopes and frustrations of a whole generation. Its reputation as a cult film reached western Europe ahead of its release. Along with Pavel Lungin’s *Taxi blues (Taksi-blyuz)*, it reinforced the idea of a disorientated Soviet society that had lost all faith in official discourse. It should also be pointed out that this story of adolescent rebellion benefited enormously from the explosive performance of actress Natalya Negoda.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The story is set in a drab industrial town on the shores of the Sea of Azov, far from the Soviet capitals, at the end of the 1980s. An ordinary Soviet family lives in a cramped, uncomfortable council flat: the father is given to drinking vodka, despite being a lorry driver, and the mother, who is a factory foreman, does what she can to run her home in an orderly manner. But she has difficulty coping with the extravagant behaviour and desire for independence of their daughter Vera, a scatty teenager who shows little inclination to respect traditional family or social order. Her way of dressing is the external sign of her rebellion: she wears fishnet stockings and provocative miniskirts and chooses

eccentric hairstyles. She shows little enthusiasm for the professional training that is offered her and refuses to accept a gloomy social future, preferring to haunt the cafés and dance floors with her friend Titaskaya. She likes rock music, boyfriends, love and freedom ... and a few illicit products! She doesn't care if she and her group of friends are frowned on by the community and often chased by the local militia. One evening when she is out dancing, she meets a handsome, enigmatic and disillusioned young man ...

**Choices and perspective.** In dealing with the problems and excesses of Russian youth, whose relations with the rest of Soviet society had completely broken down, Vasili Pichul conducts a pitiless autopsy of a collective failure. Against this background of biting political and social criticism, which perhaps blackens the period somewhat excessively (but then that is the nature of this sort of film), the film paints a moving portrait of a disorientated young brat, who behaves outrageously but refuses to abandon any of her dreams or go back on anything she has rejected, and who, above all, is likely to interest other young Europeans. Some of them, although living in very different societies, will identify in one way or another with this new “rebel without a cause”.

#### *Suggestions for research*

1. *A picture of a society and values in a state of crisis*
  - The difficulties of everyday life in a humble section of society.
  - Wasted lives? Vera's parents seem not to have had any ambitions other than those imposed upon them by an all-powerful state. What impression do we get of their lives?
  - Vera's elder brother seems to have been successful, but how does his character come across? In what way is he a metaphor of Soviet society as a whole?
  - The social and ecological problems depicted in the film. A list of them could be drawn up following the order in which they occur in the narrative, for example: housing conditions, the inadequacies of the education system, the environment (the port and urban landscapes) and the seriousness of the scourge of alcoholism (be careful here: the film makes no moral statement of any kind, but it clearly makes an observation). It might be pointed out, somewhat cynically, that the search for intoxication is one of the few points that two generations, which are opposed in almost every other way, have in common. But are their motives the same?
2. *Young people's rejection of the establishment*
  - Family squabbles: give some examples and the pretexts for them. What is it that Vera wants of her family and that it cannot give? Are there any moments of hope or tenderness? What does this family of “oldies” represent in the 1980s in contrast with the rising and impatient young genera-

tion? (A metaphorical denunciation of the gerontocracy in whose hands Soviet power usually lay?)

- In what ways are Vera and the other young people in contradiction with the official universe? Give examples, of which there are many throughout the film, often tinged with humour. For instance, the ironic remarks and jokes in the scene where Vera hitches a lift.
  - How do the authorities react? What is the militia's attitude towards the young people's meetings?
  - The dangers of excess: can the revolt achieve anything? What explanation can be given for Vera's suicide attempt?
3. *Emancipated film-making*
- What camera technique is used as often as possible by the director and his chief cameraman, Yefim Reznikov?
  - How is this mobility perceived? What effect does it create? In what way does this filming technique echo the film's general approach?



**Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown  
(Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios)  
by Pedro Almodóvar**

*Spain, 1988, colour, 88 min.*

*Themes: feminine condition – La Movida – a society in search of modernisation*

**A. Background to the film**

**The director.** Pedro Almodóvar was born to humble parents in a village in la Mancha in 1949. It was there that he learned what it is to be lonely and different from others, soon finding himself at variance with the conservative society in which he lived. He moved to Madrid, where he created his own personal, eccentric culture, devouring books and becoming a keen visitor of the Madrid film library.

It was also on a purely self-taught basis that he began making short films in amateur Super 8 format. They were original and funny, much influenced by strip cartoons and the alternative youth culture that was springing up in Spain in the post-Franco period. He made his first feature film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and other girls on the heap* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*), in 1979. Since then, he has made a film every year, going from strength to strength in the art of direction.

In 1987, he founded his own production company with his brother Agustín. In 1988, *Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown* caused a sensation both in Spain, where it won all the Spanish cinema Goya Awards, and abroad. French audiences especially showed their enthusiasm for this extraordinary, unclassifiable film-maker, whose obvious charisma has made him increasingly popular with the media.

**The context at the time of release.** Almodóvar's work belongs to the exceptional historical period that began in Spain following the death of Franco in 1975. The transition to democracy opened up new cultural and social vistas. *La Movida*, a festive, playful and frenetic alternative cultural movement was in full swing in every city, and especially in Madrid, which for many years had had the reputation of being austere. It captivated young people and gave birth to eccentric lifestyles, new modes of conduct and a wild desire for life and modernity in a climate of personal and collective emancipation. It was hardly surprising that homosexuals, so repressed under Franco, took a lead role in this unbridled movement and used it to express boundless creativity. *La Movida* was a

night-time movement, invading the fashionable social meeting places – bars, discotheques, art galleries – where artists and merry-makers of all sorts rubbed shoulders.

Almodóvar, both in his personal life and his work, was seen as an emblematic figure of this movement and one of its best chroniclers. Without any deliberate attempt to do so, he reflected the movement in a personal and fascinating way. Or rather, he was its enthusiastic seismographer, recording and amplifying the tremendous quakes that shook Spanish society.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Pepa, a young actress from Madrid, has a job dubbing American films in Spanish. Her lover, Ivan, leaves a short message on her answering machine telling her that he wants to leave her. The next day, she receives the results of her pregnancy test: she is expecting a baby. She tries to find Ivan, who is doing everything he can to avoid her. She goes to see a woman lawyer, but is dismissed offhandedly.

Pepa, now desperate, puts the flat she has been living in up for rent. A crowd of people come to visit it: Candela, a friend of Pepa's who is involved in a murky story of international terrorism; Lucía, a former mistress of Ivan's who wants to kill him; Carlos, Ivan's son, and his fiancée, Marisa. To add to the confusion, police officers pursuing a group of terrorists regularly burst in and, finally, a telephone repairman arrives.

Pepa, unable to cope with the throng, puts them all to sleep by serving them a gazpacho laced with sleeping pills! A little peace and quiet follows enabling her to reflect on the day's events. As she turns everything over in her mind, it all fits into place: she realises that the woman lawyer is Ivan's new mistress and that the two lovers are to leave for Sweden that very day. She rushes to the airport in a frenzied taxi race: but will she arrive in time to foil the evil plans of Lucía, who is still hell-bent on murdering Ivan?

**Choices and perspective.** As this brief summary shows, the frenetic style of the film owes much to American "crazy comedies". Almodóvar is a great admirer of Hollywood directors such as Billy Wilder. The screenplay piles one bizarre, implausible scene on top of another, and yet each one of them is based on a remarkable observation of contemporary behaviour. In so doing, Almodóvar creates a rich and varied universe full of portrayals which, although eccentric, represent the director's version of the world and, beyond that, the numerous questions to which Spanish society is seeking answers in its search for modernity. The film provides an opportunity for an intensely interesting and amusing line of questioning on the essentially feminine world it depicts and on the "phoney sex war". Indeed, some critics saw it as a "fascinating account of the condition of women in post-Franco Spain".



*Suggestions for research*1. *Women are present throughout*

- Apart from the large number of women characters, how does the director manage to imbue the film with the “feminine” point of view? With which characters in the film is the audience led to sympathise? Is the masculine point of view clearly expressed at any point in the film?
- Draw up a full list of the female characters, from major roles down to minor characters. What types of women are portrayed? How are these modern women, “products” of contemporary Spain, depicted in terms of their social status, jobs, daily habits and relations with other people? Are they all likeable?
- In contrast, how are the male characters portrayed? Why, in the words of one critic, do they cut such a sorry figure in this universe?

2. *Are women men’s victims?*

- In spite of the above remarks, the women are often shown to be the victims of the men. Why? How do the love affairs frequently end?
- Is this choice a “sociological” observation? Almodóvar gave us a key to his film when he said: “At least women know how to behave when their boyfriends leave them. They have no sense of modesty, or of being ridiculous, or of that horrible thing that used to be called ‘self-esteem’”. What opportunities for script and drama did the director see his initial choice as offering?
- Which female character does he invite his audience to identify or sympathise with most? What do Pepa’s reactions reveal of her conception of the world and life?
- Which female character is portrayed as Pepa’s opposite? By what clever ploy in the screenplay and direction is she depicted as a vestige of the past?
- What do we learn from the dialogues of each character’s attitude towards sexual freedom?
- The family, an important aspect of Spanish society, is always present in Almodóvar’s films. How are mother figures presented here? What about the image of the father?

3. *It’s a mad, mad, mad modern world*

- How do the sets and costumes suggest modernity? Do they reveal a certain taste for caricature?
- The director captures the troubles of modern urban life and the neurotic or wild behaviour that results from hectic, big-city life with a great deal of humour. Identify some of the situations in which the women are particularly involved.

- What are the principal sources of stress? How, paradoxically, does the director turn them into symbols of an inability to communicate (give a few examples from specific sequences)? How do the characters get rid of their stress? Are the solutions proposed by the film ironical?
- It would also be worthwhile studying the worlds of cinema and advertising and the portrayal of the city caught up in the turmoil of modernity, but in which pockets of quasi-village life, such as Pepa's terrace, continue to exist.

### **III. IMMIGRATION**



# Introduction

## Mass phenomena

Since the 19th century and the succession of industrial revolutions, European populations have been profoundly affected by two major migration trends: within individual countries, there has been a large-scale rural exodus as masses of country-dwellers have left their roots behind and moved to expanding urban areas, while on a European and global scale, countries enjoying more rapid economic growth and more widespread prosperity have attracted large numbers of immigrants from regions suffering from underdevelopment and unemployment.

In Europe, the rate and scale of these phenomena increased in the three decades following the second world war, a period of recovery and sustained economic growth. The considerable labour requirements as a result of the industrial boom led to a mass influx of immigrant workers into what are euphemistically known as “host countries”.

Two types of immigration, which are not always easy to tell apart, thus combined to meet the demands of rapid growth. As this growth reached its peak, “traditional” immigration from countries with a high population surplus and widespread unemployment was supplemented by the immigration of contract workers at the request of large firms – in particular, car manufacturers – or government agencies.

These labour flows mainly involved immigrants from southern European countries, such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, former Yugoslavia and Turkey. Nationals of former colonies in Africa and Asia preferred to move to their previous countries.

Gradually, as certain European societies, particularly within the European Union, began to enjoy significant economic growth themselves, the population drift away from these areas slowed down and then dried up altogether. Italy, Spain and Portugal, for example, have now practically stopped acting as emigration countries and are themselves taking in fairly substantial levels of foreign workers and refugees.

In the past, immigrant populations were largely used to meet the demands of economic growth. However, since the recession set in, they have repeatedly been held responsible for unemployment and all the evils of society by unscrupulous political factions and sections of the media, which have called for a reduction of their rights or even their expulsion. Such irresponsible attitudes have stirred up xenophobic and racist urges, which have sometimes provoked appalling acts of violence. Immigrants have suffered more than any other group from the effects of the recession and have now taken on a new role: that of scapegoats.

### Personal stories

For a long time, European cinema had very little to say about migration flows; popular films merely showed a few foreign faces in European cities, usually as vague outlines, for their picturesque and/or disturbing effect. A film such as Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1934), which featured an Italian immigrant as the central character, was very much an exception.

Italian cinema was probably one of the first to tackle this issue in the post-war period, whether in relation to internal migration (for example the family from the Mezzogiorno moving to Milan in Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his brothers*) or in relation to the mass emigration of unemployed people from Sicily or the Abruzzi region (for example *The path of hope* or *Bread and chocolate*).

It took longer for the cinema in the main immigration countries (France, Germany, Great Britain and northern Europe) to reflect the presence of immigrants, the work they did and the problems they faced. In the 1970s, with the revival of a more "political" approach to cinema, a number of humanist or militant films condemned the conditions to which these people, Europe's drudges, were subjected and angrily exposed racist or xenophobic practices. Films such as *Elise ou la vraie vie* or *Ali: fear eats the soul* are, in extremely different styles, representative of this period.

Nowadays, the tragic problems of illegal immigration and the over-exploitation it entails are the main themes that have been addressed by certain socially-conscious directors in Spain, Italy or Belgium (for example *The promise* by the Dardenne brothers).

Over the past decade, a number of films dealing with the integration and identity problems of young people of immigrant origin have been released in France, Great Britain and Germany, often directed by talented youngsters who are themselves from immigrant communities. These films are less directly militant but are driven by a genuine desire to do something about society, attacking the discrimination and injustice suffered at the hands of the host country, as well as the oppressive and archaic aspects of the immigrants' own family and community life. The films sometimes adopt a rebellious tone but there is often plenty of humour and mockery. They have enjoyed considerable box-office success. In a sense, the fact that they exist at all is the best indication that integration is beginning to work in European societies, which are becoming increasingly open to cultural influences from elsewhere – even if, as is common knowledge, there are still serious problems.

### Classroom use

The way in which these films are actually used in the classroom will of course depend on the audience; the presence of large numbers of children of immigrant origin in most European school systems means that although this approach is essential, delicate issues are sometimes involved.

It therefore seems helpful to give a few general recommendations for productive use of films dealing with immigration before suggesting ways of approaching each film in turn.

1. *The explanatory stage should be kept simple yet thorough*

- What is the chronological background to the film? The period in which the film is set must be made clear: population movements vary in time, scale and composition, and changes in economic conditions and laws occur very quickly.
- What people, family groups, communities and nationalities are involved in the examples of migration portrayed in the film?
- Where does their journey begin? What route do they take? Where do they arrive? Some mapwork is essential to locate these reference points.
- What are their reasons for leaving – if any reasons are given explicitly or hinted at in the film? Do they leave of their own accord? What constraints or pressure are they subjected to? What events influence them?
- Why do they choose their particular destination? By chance, or because of specific needs or hopes?
- The journey and arrival: what difficulties do they face? What means of transport do they use? Are they assisted by support networks or smugglers? Do they enter the country legally? Or illicitly? How are they received and treated by the authorities?
- What are their living and working conditions like? What efforts are made to integrate them into society?
- How do the host country's inhabitants react towards them: are they receptive, indifferent or hostile? Are there any examples of xenophobic or racist behaviour? Are there any displays of sympathy or generosity in the film?

2. *The director's point of view must be analysed and clearly understood*

- To what nationality or community do the director/screenplay writer/main actors belong? Who produced the film, and for what audience?
- What is the overall purpose of the film? Is there a clear intention to be critical or didactic? Does the director treat the theme of immigration as a subject in itself or as a pretext for melodrama?
- Is the tone of the film serious or comic? There may be a wide range of moods.
- Is the film's portrayal of immigrant populations realistic, bleak or scornful? (Reasons must, of course, be given). Are there any discernible stereotypes?
- Do any major problems seem to be brushed aside? If so, what problems and why?





## Historical representations of immigration

### Toni by Jean Renoir

France, 1934, B/W, 84 min.

Themes: immigration – relations between men and women – everyday life in the 1930s

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Jean Renoir (1894-1979) was one of France's greatest film-makers, directing several undisputed classics. The son of the painter Auguste Renoir, he served in the air force during the war and became a film director at a relatively late stage. His first silent feature-length film, *Nana*, was released in 1926. Renoir very soon graduated to the world of talking pictures, with *The bitch* (*La chienne*) and *Boudu saved from drowning* (*Boudu sauvé des eaux*) paving the way for later masterpieces such as *Grand illusion* (*La grande illusion*) and *The rules of the game* (*La règle du jeu*).

The filming of *Toni* in 1934 marked a new departure in Renoir's choice of themes, landscapes and methods: the Ile-de-France riverside scenes were replaced by the dry, harsh landscapes of Provence and Michel Simon's working-class Parisian tones by southern French and Italian accents. The choice of on-location shooting in the south of France was encouraged by co-operation with Marcel Pagnol's technical crew. Renoir's sudden interest in working-class conditions hints at the development of his political views. His sympathy for the plight of the humble and poor accounts for his subsequent enthusiasm for the Popular Front.

**The screenplay,** according to Renoir, was taken from a real-life event, a *crime passionnel* in the Italian immigrant community in the Bouches-du-Rhône area. It must be stressed that this was an extremely daring subject for a film-maker to tackle in 1934, choosing an immigrant worker as the hero at a time when French society was badly affected by an economic crisis. Violent xenophobic campaigns conducted by dissident groups and the far right-wing press were fostering attitudes of mistrust, and in some cases hatred, of foreign workers among a substantial proportion of the public. All the worst prejudices were stirred up: for example, people from the Mediterranean (Spain and in particular Italy) were said to be naturally lazy and violent, guilty of the lowest forms of depravity and impossible to integrate into society.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In the early 1930s, in a small corner of southern France near Martigues and the Berre coastal lagoon, large numbers of Spanish and Italian immigrants are working in quarries and on building sites. Some have been there for many years, while others have only just arrived.

The film follows the story of Toni, a working-class immigrant from the Piedmont region who has been in the area for several years, working as a farm labourer or a quarryman. He lives with Marie, his landlady, who treated him kindly when he first arrived but is a jealous woman. Toni is irresistibly attracted to Josefa, the beautiful Spanish girl who lives on her uncle Sebastian's farm.

However, Albert the foreman, a smooth-talking seducer, wins Josefa over and marries her. Toni, in despair, reluctantly marries Marie; to save money, the weddings are held on the same day. However, thwarted passions lead to tragedy. Toni and Marie argue constantly. Toni walks out and moves into a hut on a hill, where he can watch over the house of the woman he still loves, Josefa. In doing so, he witnesses a dramatic incident: Josefa, urged on by a new lover, is attempting to rob Albert. When Albert catches her, she shoots him dead.

Toni decides to disguise the murder as a suicide. But he is caught by the police and admits that he committed the crime. Unaware that Josefa too has confessed, Toni tries to run away and join her, but is shot dead on the railway bridge. A train arrives, bringing in new workers from abroad.

**Choices and perspective.** Jean Renoir explained his ideas as follows: "The subject of the film is taken from a real-life event which took place in a corner of southern France that was sufficiently wild for me to use some dramatic camera shots. The region is mainly inhabited by immigrants of Italian origin, half worker and half peasant. Passions run deep among them, and the men on whom I based Toni always carried a heavy atmosphere with them, reminiscent of the fatal destiny of heroes of tragedies or popular songs. We did not use a studio for *Toni*; the landscapes and houses were just as we found them. The people, whether they were played by actors or by the inhabitants of Martigues, were aiming to look like the passers-by they were supposed to be representing."<sup>1</sup>

In the film, Renoir is clearly attempting to strike an innovative balance between the realism of the characters and situations, which are firmly rooted in a very specific social context, and the refined narration of a tragedy arising from violent feelings and passions. In this way, he acts as a forerunner for other realist film-makers, such as those of the Italian neo-realist movement. It is particularly interesting to note that among those involved in the filming of *Toni* was a young assistant, Luchino Visconti.

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1. Robert Laffont, *Dictionnaire du cinéma*, Bouquins, p. 1449. Original source: Jean Renoir, *Ecrits de Jean Renoir*, Belfond, 1974.

*Analysis of the depiction of immigration*

1. *Analysis of the opening scenes (until Toni's arrival)*

- Explain the opening caption: “The action takes place in southern France, a Latin region where nature and the sun, in defiance of the spirit of Babel, mix races together so successfully”.
- What language is used in the song played during the opening credits? How do the first shots integrate the song into the plot? What landscapes do the travellers see from the train? Why, and for whom, do these landscapes have an emotional effect? Does the presence of the guitar and of wine correspond to a stereotypical vision of Italian immigration?
- As the train goes by, the men working on the line notice that the travellers are Piedmontese: what comments do they make? In what way can this dialogue have an educational effect on the audience?
- Pay close attention to the reasons for immigration hinted at in the dialogue: “My country is whichever one feeds me”; “There’s a smell of oil here... there’s a smell of work too”. What other possible reasons for Italians from the Mussolini era are not mentioned?
- Why is Toni questioned by the police at the station exit? How are the checks carried out? Does this tell us anything about the limitations of Jean Renoir’s views on contemporary French society?

2. *Work on the film as a whole. Try to identify any reference points in time and space as precisely as possible.*

- The film was made in 1934 and is concerned with a phenomenon of the time: what aspects situate the film in this period – for example, the workers’ clothes (such as caps, baggy trousers, wide belts) and the references to unemployment (what crisis was Europe undergoing at the time?)? What images of industrial development are discernible – for example, the railway viaduct, the reference to the smell of oil (take care to stress the contrast with modern-day “environmental” sensibilities), and the quarry?
- What aspects of everyday life seem to shed light on living standards and cultural habits? What are the first forms of motorised transport available to the workers?
- What rural landscapes are in evidence? In what way do these reflect continuity and a long historical tradition (the Mediterranean atmosphere, vines, olive trees) or work carried out in the past?
- The depiction of Italian immigrants: what are the typical physical and behavioural features, as portrayed in the film? Does Renoir manage to avoid stereotypes?
- The 1930s in France saw a surge in xenophobia, fuelled by certain sections of the press and far-right groups keen to exploit the difficult economic climate. Note the hostile remarks made to foreigners; in many cases, it will be

observed that these remarks are made by foreigners of different origins. Try to explain this apparently paradoxical situation.

**Synoptic study.** Using all the above observations, set out the key ideas of the film.

**Write a critique of this portrayal** by relating it to other documents: in France, Italian immigration is particularly strong in Provence, the Dauphiné and Savoy regions and Alsace-Lorraine.

## The path of hope (Il camino della speranza) by Pietro Germi

Italy, 1950, B/W, 90 min.

Themes: unemployment – social conflicts – illegal migration

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Pietro Germi (1914-74) was born into a humble family in Genoa. He had had a difficult start to life, which is reflected in his sympathy for the poor and his sense of reality. Having been Alessandro Blasetti's assistant, he began directing films in 1947. Influenced by neo-realism, he directed a number of powerful socially-conscious films, enjoying one of his greatest successes with *The path of hope (Il camino della speranza)* in 1950. In a sense, he provided a bridge between neo-realist themes and Italian-style comedy with a series of exuberant films in which satire and irony are always backed up by sharp observation of the foibles of contemporary Italian society. *Divorce – Italian style (Divorzio all'italiana)* and *Too much for one man (L'immorale)* are two minor classics notable for their devastating humour and perceptive analysis. In the words of Freddy Buache, the former director of the Swiss cinema archives in Lausanne, Pietro Germi was “an attentive observer, a very honest craftsman and a warm-hearted moralist”. Germi has often been obscured by more prestigious directors, but deserves to be rediscovered.

**The screenplay.** Like many Italian films of this period, the film is the result of teamwork. While Pietro Germi contributes a sense of reality and authenticity, Federico Fellini and Tullio Pinelli bring a touch of spirituality: the long path becomes a metaphor for human destiny, making its way towards an improbable promised land. The French critic André Bazin considered their work “one of the finest Italian post-war screenplays on the eminently epic theme – and hence a theme suited to the cinema – of the journey to the promised land”. The film won several prizes at Cannes and Berlin, although many critics regarded the “happy ending” as artificial.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In Sicily, immediately after the second world war, closure of the sulphur mines condemns the last remaining miners to unemployment and hardship. A man claiming to be a labour recruiter abuses their trust and promises them work in France. They set off with their families. However, their journey is

fraught with obstacles: they are soon abandoned by their guide and pursued by the police, only escaping with great difficulty. Worn out and demoralised, some decide to return to Sicily while others carry on in spite of everything. To survive, they try to find casual jobs along the way: in one case, without realising what is happening, they are hired at a farm to break the day labourers' strike. They are jeered at, beaten and chased away by the striking labourers. After all their suffering, those who are still left finally arrive at the Alps amid a snowstorm. However, the border is guarded. A mountain army officer is sympathetic and humane towards them: have they at last reached the promised land?

*Suggestions for research*

- Most of the questions suggested in the general introduction could be used here. The most interesting classroom exercise on this film may be to compare modern-day Italian society with this past era. Italy now has to contend with large-scale illegal immigration and masses of refugees from the Balkans; this film may encourage a young audience to become more aware of these issues.
- Particular emphasis should be placed on the economic and social conditions in the Mezzogiorno in 1950, as depicted in the film. Identify the many details of daily life that have changed.
- Discuss migration flows from Sicily or southern Italy: the numbers involved, the times at which the main waves occurred, the migrants' main destinations (France was not one of them!) and so on.
- The incidents on the journey can also be examined from a time perspective. The scene where the Sicilian migrants are called upon to break the farm workers' strike may be compared with the similar scene in John Ford's 1939 adaptation of Steinbeck's novel *The grapes of wrath*.
- Another idea might be to examine the image of France, the land of hope, as portrayed in the film. In what way was this image an illusion? In what way was it partly true? How is the mountain army officer's generous attitude to be interpreted? What recent events might this call to mind for a modern-day audience? What groups of people try to cross the Alpine borders illegally nowadays? Why and how?

**Synoptic study.** Using all the above observations, set out the key ideas of the film.

**Elise, or real life  
(Elise ou la vraie vie)  
by Michel Drach**

*France-Algeria, 1970, colour, 104 min.*

*Themes: immigration – working-class conditions – racism – decolonisation – relations between men and women*

**A. Background to the film**

**The director.** Michel Drach (1930-90) – after studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts – became the assistant to the film director Jean-Pierre Melville. At the age of 21, he began making short films before embarking, in the wake of the New Wave movement, on his first feature-length film in 1959, a detective film which was awarded the Louis Delluc prize. He married the actress Marie-José Nat, giving her tailor-made roles in splendid films such as *Amelie, or the time to love* (*Amélie ou le temps d'aimer*) and in particular *Elise ou la vraie vie*. However, these remarkable films merely won critical acclaim. *Violins at the ball*, 1974, (*Les violins du bal*) was a highly personal and extremely moving film in which Drach drew on his memories as a young Jewish boy to depict the horrors of anti-Semitism during the occupation. He also made a forceful plea against capital punishment in *The red pullover* (*Le pull-over rouge*), based on Gilles Perrault's well-known investigation into a murder inquiry.

Drach was a very private film-maker who shunned media attention and was often misunderstood by the critics. His highly sensitive work no doubt deserves to be rediscovered and reappraised.

**The screenplay** is an adaptation of Claire Etcherelli's novel of the same name. Drach worked on it together with Claude Lanzmann, who was responsible in particular for the dialogues. The actors Marie-José Nat, Mohammed Chouikh and Jean-Pierre Bisson invested a good deal of effort into the humanist story.

**Public reaction.** The film, a bold undertaking partly financed by Algeria, depicts a dark, controversial period of French modern history: the Algerian war, as experienced from mainland France and from a working-class perspective. Presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1970, the film achieved an audience of just under 150000 when it was released that November. In the post-1968 climate, it was somewhat simplistically labelled as a "political" film, a form of publicity which worked both ways: it attracted the militants, but was likely to put off Saturday night cinema-goers. It has rarely been shown on television, failed

to attain cult status, and has now fallen into oblivion. Nonetheless, it had a profound effect on all those who saw it when it was first released.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** The film is set in Paris between autumn 1957 and spring 1958, at a time when the Algerian war is troubling people's consciences and poisoning the country's political and social climate.

Elise, a young woman from Bordeaux, goes up to Paris to find work, joining her brother Lucien, who works in a large car factory. Lucien is a militant worker and is particularly caught up in efforts to bring about peace in Algeria. Elise has nothing to live on and is given a job as a semi-skilled production-line worker at the factory. The work is hard and repetitive, and the air is filled with engine noise. Every evening, she collapses with exhaustion.

In Elise's workshop, there are large numbers of immigrants, many of them of Algerian origin. She is attracted to one of them, Arezki. But their love is threatened by the obstacles of latent racism and police harassment. Arezki, as an Algerian militant, is constantly bothered and humiliated by the police; Elise's indignation and revulsion can do nothing to ease the situation. "Real life" is unkind: her brother Lucien dies tragically, and her lover is imprisoned. Alone and penniless, she is forced to return to Bordeaux, but she has grown in awareness and courage.

**Choices and perspective.** The film must be carefully situated in both its contexts. Made in 1970, it is directly influenced by the events of May and June 1968. Hence the film both records events and plays an active part in them; it has a deliberate political slant, while ensuring that the facts are accurately represented. It is a rarity among French films of the period, which "in spite of the left-wing intellectual climate, resist a critical description of the daily lives of workers and immigrants", to quote Freddy Buache, the former director of the Swiss cinema archives in Lausanne. It involves extremely careful historical reconstruction, paying close attention to working conditions in factories, and to the living conditions of immigrants in shanty towns or in the Goutte d'Or district. Checks on the basis of facial appearance, raids, arbitrary detention, humiliation – all practices which were sadly common among the French police at the time – are exposed in a tone of suppressed indignation and understatement, which makes the criticism all the more effective. The latent racism of a section of the working class, and the exploitation of this sentiment by the management, are depicted entirely objectively. Yet the film is also a plea for fraternity between human beings and a declaration of faith in the existence of love in spite of all the obstacles and prejudices.



*Suggestions for research*1. *The difficult conditions faced by semi-skilled workers*

- The various scenes in the car factory workshops are of particular documentary value: note, for example, the processes of production-line work, both in terms of technical organisation (the order in which parts are fitted, the way in which car bodies are moved along the line, the tools used, etc.) and in terms of impact on the workers (compartmentalisation of work, the regimented work rate, the noise, the strain involved and so on).
- Would this type of work have been attractive during a period of full employment (the early 1970s)? Why is the factory compelled/able to employ large numbers of immigrants and women in jobs of this kind?

2. *Everyday living conditions: food and transport*

- The conditions in which Elise and her fellow workers live sometimes seem perfectly acceptable: what goods do they seem able to afford? How do they travel? What are their most serious day-to-day problems? Give a detailed description of where they live: rooms, hostels, etc.
- If possible, compare descriptive passages from Claire Etcherelli's novel with the director's treatment of these passages (for example the scene where Elise comes home from work).

3. *Algerian immigrants as scapegoats*

- First of all, note down all the information the film provides (whether through dialogue or through visual depiction) on the character of Arezki: his precise origins, the circumstances in which he came to France, any references he makes to his country or his family. What is his nationality in 1957-58? What are his views on the decolonisation process? Does he explain why he is politically active? What relationship does he have with the other Algerian workers?
- Does the film refer much to Arezki's religious beliefs and habits? Does the Muslim religion appear to shape his identity? Taking the necessary precautions, identify the considerable changes that have occurred in this respect in the 30 years since the film was made.
- Intervention by the authorities within the factory (the foremen) and in the outside world (the police). Checks were frequently carried out at the time: why? How are they depicted in the film?

Note the indications of racial hatred or disguised racism in the attitudes of the other workers. How are these reactions intensified by the events of the time? Who tries to combat these attitudes? What political arguments does Lucien attempt to put forward? What comparisons with other historical situations does he make? How successful is this approach *vis-à-vis* his fellow workers?

Is the relationship between Arezki and Elise accepted? Identify and discuss the main reactions of all those, whether French or North African, who know the two lovers.

**Write a critique of this portrayal** by relating it to traditional historical documents; this is an essential exercise in a historical context which is still particularly sensitive today. Compile people's recollections of the period, taking care to develop a genuine critical comparison between the evidence obtained.

## Strangers in paradise

### Bread and chocolate (*Pane e cioccolata*) by Franco Brusati

*Italy, 1973, colour, 115 min.*

*Themes: migratory phenomena – xenophobic reactions – assimilation/integration*

*To be pointed out: the still from the film of Nino Manfredi with his superb blond hair*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Franco Brusati, an Italian writer and man of the theatre, was born in Milan in 1922. After brilliant legal studies in Italy, England and Switzerland (where he took refuge from the Germans during the second world war), he made a promising start in journalism. He later became Rossellini's assistant in Rome, and wrote a number of screenplays in the 1950s and 1960s, also turning the dialogue of films by Truffaut and René Clair into Italian. But his main interest was the theatre and he directed only seven films – of which *Bread and chocolate* is unquestionably the best.

**The context.** In the prosperous Switzerland of the 1960s and 1970s unemployment was virtually unknown, but the country's industrial success had left labour in short supply. For Europeans from poorer areas this oasis of wealth at the heart of Europe was a sort of latter-day paradise, where a decent living could be made. In 1972, the number of foreigners living in Switzerland topped one million for the first time, representing 16% to 17% of the total population.

The vast majority of these foreigners were Italian (40%), followed by Spaniards (10%), Yugoslavs and Turks. Although Italy's economy had clearly taken off since the Common Market became effective, chronic underdevelopment in the south was still forcing many people to migrate to the industrial north and, further afield, to Germany, France, Switzerland and other countries. In the early 1970s, when the film was made, Italy was still the main source of immigrant labour in Europe.

Today, as we know, the flow of emigrants has dried up, and Italy itself is now opening its doors to immigrant workers from the poorest parts of the Balkans and Africa. The mass exodus left a lasting mark on the Italian psyche. "I come from a family of emigrants and I know what it means for a man to be uprooted", said Nino Manfredi, who starred in the film. No surprise, therefore, that migrant workers turn up more often in Italian films than in those produced by many other countries – except, perhaps, the United States. Italian writers and directors have

portrayed the two archetypes: the migrant who leaves southern roots to work in the north, and the emigrant who goes into exile abroad.

**Public reaction.** Franco Brusati set out to tackle the difficult themes of uprooting and loneliness in a comedy – to make “a good popular film”. His choice of Nino Manfredi, highly-regarded for his comic roles, is significant. Yet the film did relatively badly at the box office.

It should be noted that it was first distributed in France four years after its release in Italy, but got excellent reviews and scored a major critical success. It would be particularly interesting to know how Swiss audiences reacted to it.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Nino Garofoli is an Italian immigrant in Switzerland. He is working, on probation, as a waiter in a restaurant, with another immigrant, “the Turk”, as rival. He spends his free time walking round the town, where his casual attitude and Mediterranean looks rouse many locals’ mistrust. He loses his job at the restaurant, and his residence permit with it – but can turn to his neighbour Elena, a Greek political refugee, for affection and support. He gets a job as manservant to a millionaire, but loses all his savings when his boss commits suicide. Out of work yet again, he considers returning to Italy before taking an illegal, undeclared job in a chicken factory. He dyes his hair blond and tries to pass himself off as a north European. But he finds himself watching a football match between Italy and Switzerland on TV in a working-class bar. The xenophobic comments of those around him are more than his Latin temperament can take. He cheers his own team, a fight breaks out, the police arrest him and turn him out of Switzerland. But he’ll be back.

**Choices and perspective.** In *Bread and chocolate*, Franco Brusati gives us a picture of an Italian immigrant worker in Switzerland which is comic, and yet serious – a combination typical of Italian comedies at that time. Social satire – often biting, sometimes ferocious – is his medium, and he uses it to tackle the problems of immigrants, an issue rarely dealt with in films. His unusually well-constructed screenplay subtly analyses the various aspects of the immigrant condition, as seen through the immigrant’s own eyes.

### *Pinpointing themes of relevance to the immigrant condition*

Two approaches are possible. With good classes, who are used to this kind of work, the teacher need only say what the general aims of the exercise are before the film is shown, and then note the students’ comments, prompting them to rank the themes identified in order of importance. With classes less skilled at this type of exercise, the teacher must first decide which themes are most important, and guide students towards them by asking the right questions, such as:

- How does the film reveal the ways in which immigrants are exploited?

- Where do the waiters in the restaurant come from? What about the management?
- How are the immigrants led to compete with one another?
- How is the precariousness of their situation exploited?
- The film shows immigrants living in various kinds of accommodation – what are they?

But the director does not simply focus on the physical aspects of his characters' situation; he is also interested in its psychological and emotional effects. The alienation suffered by individuals trapped in the emigration process is the second theme to be covered.

The film also comments on a certain idea of Switzerland and of what it means to be Italian – two more themes which students might consider.



## Ali: fear eats the soul (Angst essen Seele auf) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Germany, 1973, colour, 93 min.

Themes: immigration – xenophobia – tradition versus modernity – women’s liberation

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Of all the young German film-makers who first came to prominence in the late 1960s, Rainer W. Fassbinder (1945-82) is probably – still – the most forceful, the most subversive, the most powerful and also the most controversial.

Growing up in the post-war era, he had a difficult adolescence. His parents divorced, and his father put him to work, helping to manage the bed-sits he rented out to immigrants. This brought him face-to-face with the difficult conditions in which immigrants eked out an existence on the fringes of society – a new world which fascinated him. It was in this milieu that he had his first homosexual relationship, still considered shocking at the time. He changed jobs repeatedly – a bit of journalism here, a bit of theatre there.

In 1967 he joined the innovative Action-Theater group as an actor. He later turned director and wrote his first play, *Katzelmacher*. As early as 1968, he founded the break-away Antitheater, with other members of the troupe, including Hanna Schygulla. He made his first films, set up his own production company in 1970, worked for TV and turned out new films fast and frequently. The career which followed was feverishly prolific. With 39 films to his credit, his motto was “Do a lot of things – not just a few great ones”.

In his first films, he ruthlessly revealed the hidden underside of German prosperity and success: the people excluded from the affluent, conformist society around them – homosexuals, prostitutes, immigrant workers, failures and misfits.

**The screenplay.** Fassbinder wrote the screenplay himself. It is true that the general theme is the same as that of Douglas Sirk’s *All that heaven allows*, whose powerful melodrama Fassbinder is known to have admired. But the film’s firm footing in the realities of life in Germany and its condemnation of creeping racism were Fassbinder’s own essential contributions. Probably, too, he was trying to exorcise painful memories of his own youth, when his homosexual love

affair with Jorgos, a Greek refugee, had outraged his mother – whose intolerance had wounded him deeply.

The film was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1974 (by which time Fassbinder had already made a dozen others), and focused public attention on Fassbinder's provocatively outrageous persona.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Emmi, a German widow in her 60s, makes a modest living as a char-woman. She is lonely; she has three children, but they are all married and she does not see much of them. One day, in a café, she comes across Ali, a Moroccan immigrant worker, 30 years her junior. She falls in love with this gentle, kindly foreigner and marries him. The reactions of their entourage range from backbiting incomprehension to open hatred. Emmi's children disapprove, her female neighbours are indignant and her fellow charwomen have a field day making offensive jokes.

The couple's existence is undermined by this climate of intolerance and everyday racism. In the end, Ali dies of a stomach ulcer, after struggling to conceal his pain and avoid having to admit that he had been wrong all the time about this country, which had never really welcomed him.

**Choices and perspective.** "People used to like my films a lot, when I made the members of minorities the goodies, and the others the baddies. But when I hit on the idea – far closer to the truth – of showing how society changes minorities, how it makes them behave in all kinds of bad ways, then people stopped liking my films." (R.W. Fassbinder)<sup>1</sup>

### *Suggested areas of study*

#### 1. *Everyday racism*

- The relationship between Emmi and Ali provokes a whole series of racist reactions from people who know them. When they first meet in the café, is Emmi herself entirely free of prejudice? To which generation does she belong? What kind of ideas may she have had thrust on her and herself accepted? How and why does she overcome them?
- Note the various types of racist behaviour portrayed in the film and try to identify the main ones – from sly hypocrisy to physical aggression, from jokes in poor taste to blatant insults. Who are the various people involved (friends, neighbours, workmates, etc.) and what is the basic motive in each case (knee-jerk reactions, "rational" arguments, sexual jealousy, crazy notions that immigrants are "dangerous", theories of national identity, etc.)?
- Is anyone kind to Ali? Is this kindness entirely unambiguous?

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1. Yann Lardeau, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, Editions des Cahiers du Cinéma, quoted in *Télérama* No. 2342, 30 November 1991.



- Do the German authorities – such as the police – help to reinforce the xenophobic climate? Why?
  - Look closely at the reactions of Emmi’s immediate family. They may have various reasons for opposing her relationship with Ali. What are they?
2. *Immigrants as victims and agents of their own alienation?*
- The first priority is to form as clear a picture as possible of Fassbinder’s Ali: his country of origin, his reasons for being in Germany (whether stated or not), his level of integration into German society, his living and working conditions.
  - Taking the above-mentioned Fassbinder quotation as a starting point, try to work out how Ali himself is partly responsible for what happens to him. Specifically, what is the metaphorical significance of his illness? This is a difficult exercise, and should be tackled with maturer students, who already know something about philosophical concepts.



**Bako, the other shore**  
**(Bako, l'autre rive)**  
 by Jacques Champreux

*France-Senegal, 1978, colour*

*Themes: workers' conditions – migrants*

**A. Background to the film**

**The director.** Jacques Champreux, who was born in 1930, is best known for his screenplays. He comes from a film-making family: his father, Maurice Champreux, was a highly-skilled cameraman, and, above all, his grandfather, Louis Feuillade, was one of the pioneers of cinema before the first world war. In fact, his best screenplays are very much in the great tradition of the mass-audience serial. In particular, he worked with Franju on *Judex* and *Shadowman (Les nuits rouges)* and with Pierre Prévert on some successful television serials. Surprisingly, in his only film as director, he adopted a near-documentary style to tackle a subject regarded as completely uncommercial: illegal immigrant workers from black Africa in France. To make the film more authentic, he secured the invaluable assistance of Cheikh Dokouré, who co-authored the story and dialogue.

**The context.** In the late 1970s, when Jacques Champreux managed to get his film made, African immigration to France was a burning issue. In the countries of the Sahel, the devastating effects of drought – death of cattle, desertification – generated a mass rural exodus. The only hope for many village communities lay in the young people's going to Europe. In France, however, the oil crises had brought the boom years to an end, and growing unemployment was causing sharp public concern. Immigration and its problems were becoming useful weapons in political debate and were being distorted accordingly. At the start of his seven-year term as president (1973-81), Giscard d'Estaing set out to give the office a liberal, more relaxed image – and invited a number of immigrants from Mali, working as dustmen in Paris, to a meal at his home. But this good start was forgotten fairly quickly. The new social tensions which grew out of the crisis favoured the emergence of a populist, demagogic approach, which increasingly made immigrants, and particularly Africans, its target. The courage needed to make the film can be imagined!

**B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** Somewhere in the drought-ravaged Sahel. Despite his fiancée's misgivings, Boubacar le Bambara decides, in agreement with his fellow-villagers,

to set off for France, where his brother already lives, in the hope of finding work and being able to send money home.

He has no idea that this marks the start of an endless journey, which will take him from Dakar to Mauritania, Morocco, Barcelona and, at last, France. Trying to get aboard a French ship in Dakar, he is beaten up and robbed. He resigns himself to using the illegal channels instead. This puts him firmly on the road to hell: he is fleeced by swindlers, treated with contempt by traffickers and cheated of his few remaining coins by unscrupulous doss-house-owners – living all the time under threat of discovery by one of the police units which hunt down illegal immigrants.

Even so, he sometimes meets with fellowship and solidarity along the way.

With a few other unfortunates, he crosses the snow-covered Pyrenees, and at last reaches Paris – where, early one morning, he is found lying dead of exhaustion at the bottom of a stairwell.

**Choices and perspective.** Obviously, the main interest of Jacques Champreux's film lies in the fact that the whole story is told from the point of view of the African immigrant. All the way from the Sahel to Paris, the camera never leaves the wretched Boubacar. The pared-down plot is entirely based on real incidents, and these are presented simply, with no attempt at aesthetic effect or tear-jerking pathos. This makes the film extraordinarily authentic, and many French adolescents are horrified at its appalling picture of the way in which these "volunteer" slaves are exploited by a new breed of slave-traders – some of them from their own ethnic groups.

### *Study of two sequences*

#### 1. *The starting point*

- What are the film's first images? What do they illustrate – both realistically and symbolically? What specific climatic conditions are referred to?
- Which country is shown? What was its former relationship with France?
- How are the first decisions taken? Are they individual decisions? How does the village council operate, and who is in charge? What arguments do the various speakers use? Who has the last word?
- Emigration is not something new: which member of the family has already gone? How did he report on his experiences? Does the news he sends home encourage others to leave too? Why?
- Does the film say anything about the effects of these departures on African society?
- Try to think what some of those effects might be. Are these communities destabilised when their youngest, fittest and most enterprising members leave?

- Can the traditions and customs which held this community together survive much longer? Give reasons for your answer.
- What demographic imbalance is created in the village's population?
- 2. *The journey – its trials and tribulations*
  - Trace Boubacar's route on a map and try to work out the distance covered.
  - List the various ways he travelled: by bus, on foot, by bush taxi, lorry, canoe, ship, and so forth.
  - Note the many sums of money Boubacar has to pay the network bosses and traffickers. Are they only for transport?
  - The nearer Boubacar gets to his goal, the harder things become. Why is Barcelona particularly bad? What last illusions does he lose there?
  - In his troubles, Boubacar sometimes gets a little help from other Africans: what help and in what circumstances?
  - Lastly, describe the crossing of the Pyrenees. What other great exoduses have there been across this frontier in the recent past? Why is the crossing particularly tough for these African immigrants?



## Three immigrant viewpoints: what it means to be a Turk in Germany

### **Introduction to three films: *Germany, bitter homeland*, *Forty square metres of Germany* and *Lowest of the low***

Some very interesting work can be based on the information given in this section – but the constraints of the normal school timetable are a problem.<sup>1</sup> However, the issues raised here may prove a very fruitful field of study for student or student groups working in less rigid contexts (tutorials combined with private study, youth clubs run by social and cultural centres, university workshops, etc.).

The aim is to compare three films – *Germany, bitter homeland*, *Forty square metres of Germany* and *Lowest of the low* – all made within a period of less than ten years, and all shot from the standpoint of a Turkish immigrant confronted with German society. Two of them are fiction, and make no claim to be anything else – the work of Turkish directors who live, or have lived, in Germany. The third is an astonishing “filmed document” – the work of Günter Walraff, a German journalist, who turned himself into a typical, ordinary Turk, to produce an unsparring documentary picture of the ways in which immigrant workers are exploited.

### **Suggestions for comparative work**

As mentioned above, these three films are similar in that they approach Turkish immigration not from a German point of view, but from an immigrant point of view. But, even without going into the particular characteristics of the characters and the stories, the films are completely different in their approach to the issue, their purpose and style. Some students will perhaps be surprised to learn that immigrants cannot be reduced to a common sociological category, nor to an “ethnic identity”. They are subject to all of the complexity and the contradictions of the human condition.

An analysis on these three following films should reveal how immigrants both hope and fear the new life before them, how they are able or unable to integrate into the host society, where in spite of everything, they have chosen to live.

- Describe, based upon a detailed observation of images, the simple aspects, often the most revealing, of the immigrants daily life. What are their tasks? Their jobs? Do they earn enough money to live decently? What buying habits do they retain, which ones do they change. What do they dream of buying? What do they do for entertainment? What do they eat and where?

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1. This section has been prepared with the help of Faruk Günaltay, Turkey’s representative to Eurimages, the European support fund for the co-production, distribution, and exhibition of European cinematic works (see <http://culture.coe.fr/eurimages>).

- Do they have a love life or a “relationship”? If so, is it with someone of the same origin, with Germans or with immigrants of different origins?

Work carried out should highlight the following issues:

- What immigrants must submit to, distinguishing between what is generated by the host society (economic exploitation, racial exclusion, attitudes of indifference or wariness, etc.) and what is generated by their own psychological and cultural reactions (isolating themselves in their community, shame over losing their identity, machismo and fear of women, etc.).
- The richness of belonging to two cultures, if any. What essential values have they conserved? Can these be shared, even to a small degree, with the host society? What prejudices do immigrants gradually lose? What are the most discernable changes in their lifestyles or attitudes?
- Do they often refer back to the country of origin? How? Do they return? How are the trips back depicted?
- The manner in which each director ends his film is particularly important. Does the film end with a message of hope, a call to militancy, bitter disenchantment, a condemnation of this or that way of life, the desire to return to the native country, or the desire to settle permanently in the host country?



## Germany, bitter homeland (Almanya aci vatan) by Serif Gören

*Turkey, 1979, colour*

*Themes: immigration – the immigrant’s perception of the host society – relations between the sexes – economic alienation – moral alienation*

**The director.** Serif Gören was born in Iskeçe, Anatolia, in 1944. His cinema career began in the cutting-room, and all his films reflect his liking and talent for editing. He moved on to become an assistant to Yılmaz Güney, stepping in as director on *Yol* when the great film-maker was imprisoned. Although he followed Güney’s general instructions, Gören is the true author of the film, which took a well-deserved *Palme d’or* in Cannes in 1982. Having started to direct his own films in 1976, he made a number of very successful “Anatolian westerns”, such as *Derman* and *Kan* (unofficial English title *Blood*) in the 1980s. He has a special feeling for the beauty of the wild open spaces, and is particularly good at dramatising the inevitable clashes between modern society and outdated, but fascinating, tribal codes of honour.

His film *Germany, bitter homeland* is certainly no masterpiece, but – on the basis of his own experience and that of many other immigrants – it does give an effectively ironic picture of the problems encountered by Turks who are trying to find a place in a society which both attracts and repels them. Bitter and comic by turns, its tone recalls that of many Italian comedies.

**The plot.** The film is a linear account of all the humdrum events which make up the daily life of a Turkish worker in a German city. Its picture of the reactions of a newly arrived immigrant to the consumer society and its excesses – envy of the goods piled up in the shop windows, startled outrage at the sex shops – is sometimes funny, but often grim. There are the difficult living conditions, the near-filthy lodgings, the exhausting, thankless job – all the things he will not mention when he is boasting back in Turkey, where he hopes to go on holiday in a big, shiny car, the ultimate sign of success. There is the humiliation, the contempt, the exploitation, the problems in relations with women – but also, when a protest is staged, a sudden sense of solidarity.

*(See pp. 151-152 for comparative work.)*



**Forty square metres of Germany  
(40 Quadratmeter Deutschland)  
by Tevfik Baser**

*Germany, 1986, colour*

*Themes: immigration – the immigrant's perception of the host society –  
relations between the sexes – economic alienation – moral alienation*

**The director.** Tevfik Baser is a young Turkish film-maker, who has been living and working in Germany and Switzerland since the early 1980s. This gives him an unusually sharp eye for the practical problems, psychological traumas, failures and successes of the many other Turks drawn to Germany by the country's prosperity. He manages to treat the theme of immigration in distinctively personal style, coming back to it almost obsessively. *Forty square metres of Germany* (1986) may have been his first full-length feature, but his subsequent films – *Farewell to paradise* (*Abschied vom falschen Paradies*) and *Lebewohl, Fremde* (unofficial English title *Goodbye foreigner*) – all took up his favourite themes: the communication problems, isolation and social injustice suffered by those who are parted from their roots. He wants his films to be fully his creation, and the **screenplay** is his own work.

**The plot.** A young Anatolian woman leaves her childhood home in the depths of rural Turkey to join her husband, who is working in Germany. His plans for her come as a total shock. Believing her incapable of finding her way around an unknown town, he fears for her safety and, above all, wishes to shield her from the harmful enticements of the modern world around her. And so, day after day, he keeps her locked up in their tiny flat. Its four walls and a window opening on the courtyard – these are the confines of the young woman's world. The little girl living opposite offers the only hope of contact and communication. But the neighbours are as hostile as her husband – for different reasons.

*(See pp. 151-152 for comparative work.)*



## Lowest of the low (Ganz unten) by Günter Walraff and Jörg Gförer

*Germany, 1986, colour, with video sequences in B/W*

*Themes: immigration – the immigrant’s perception of the host society – relations between the sexes – economic alienation – moral alienation*

**The director.** Günter Walraff was born in 1942 and cannot be pigeonholed. He earned a big name as an investigative journalist in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, when he worked in various firms and factories under false names, bringing out a first book on his experiences in 1970.

In 1974, he spent some time in the Colonels’ Greece, where he campaigned in support of political prisoners, was arrested, spent 14 months in prison, and was tortured. In 1977, again under an assumed name, he was taken on as a journalist by *Bild*, the mass-circulation daily – and subsequently revealed the questionable methods used by the Axel Springer press. The result was a sensational show-down in the courts, but Walraff won the case.

Next came a project which he had long had in mind: for two years, he lived as Ali, a Turkish immigrant worker. The resulting book sold two million copies, and the film shot in secret with director Jörg Gförer’s assistance caused an uproar, putting the spotlight on the ruthless ways in which immigrant workers are exploited.

**The film and the methods used.** To conduct his investigation, Walraff changed his whole appearance. As Ali, he darkened his skin, dyed his hair and moustache black, wore dark contact lenses, and spoke a broken form of German, which he had practised carefully and based on a dialect spoken in the Cologne region. As one anonymous figure among thousands, he experienced at first hand the exploitation and exclusion suffered by all the Alis of this world.

A highly sensitive camera was hidden in the bag which Ali carried, and Walraff and Gförer used this to make a record of the things uncovered on his long and painful journey through the lower depths of modern industrial society. The picture is often blurred and of poor quality, but it still puts the social message across with overwhelming force.

The first part of the film, “Through foreign eyes”, shows all the many facets of the life of an immigrant forced to take illegal, undeclared jobs in order to survive. His only choice is to submit, and he has no defence against the voracious “slave-traders” who exploit his situation to shave every penny they can off his

already meagre wage. The only ray of hope is the vague chance that he may be able to secure the papers he needs to come into the open and get a “normal” job.

The second part, “The contract”, follows the staging of a clever plot to trap one of these slave-traders, who see impoverished immigrants merely as cheap labour, to be exploited ruthlessly. The job offered, as the hidden camera records the scene grimly, is the lethal task of cleaning out a nuclear power station – nothing less! By setting the employer up, Walraff shows the extremes to which people who refuse to see the “underdogs” as human will go.

*(See pp. 151-152 for comparative work.)*

## New migratory flows: illegal immigrants

### Letters from Alou (Las cartas de Alou) by Montxo Armendariz

*Spain, 1990, colour, 100 min.*

*Themes: illegal immigration – racism – the difficulties of those without residence or work permits*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Montxo Armendariz is very typical of the new, dynamic generation of Spanish film-makers. Born in the Basque Country, he devoted his first film to his homeland's troubles. The film *27 hours (27 horas)*, made in 1986, is a very powerful, very sombre film about the tragedy of young Basques, trapped between political violence and despairing acts of terrorism, and the criminal machinations of the drug traffickers. This urge to tackle the worst social problems head-on is also apparent in his third film, *Letters from Alou*, which takes a close look at the harsh realities of life in Spain's black African immigrant community.

#### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Spain in the early 1990s. Alou, a young African, writes home to his family, telling them about the many pitfalls he has encountered in his search for a European El Dorado. He has entered Spain illegally by sea, across the Strait of Gibraltar. Tossed into a rubber dinghy by traffickers and left to the mercy of the waves, he narrowly escapes drowning. He soon finds work in southern Spain, but he has no papers and the conditions are appalling. He and others like him are picked up by truck and taken out secretly to fields covered in plastic sheeting, where, for a pittance, they help Andalusian farmers to undercut their rivals on the European fruit and vegetable market. At least, the boss seems fairly well-disposed. Some evenings, in the cheap discos, the Africans even get the feeling that the Spanish girls do not always mind their being black. But Alou soon loses his illusions: Andalusia is not the hoped-for paradise after all. Without papers, he has no defence against the police and all the exploiters lying in wait for him. He sets off on a perilous journey, looking for work and a little human kindness. The film follows his struggle to survive, in the face of economic exploitation, racism and violence. But it also shows how well he adapts, how quickly he picks up the country's language and customs. Above all, along the way, he gets sympathetic support from his fellows and affection from a young woman. The film ends on a hopeful note – with a demonstration in support of unregistered immigrants.

**Choices and perspective.** The director chooses to tell the whole story from Alou's point of view. The camera stays with him, and he is hardly ever off-screen. The voice-over reading of his letters home helps to emphasise his perception of events. Montxo Armendariz attempts – and succeeds in – the difficult task of making a Spanish audience realise how an African immigrant sees Spanish society. The film teaches some hard but salutary lessons, and the process is facilitated by the humanity and humour – despite everything – of this outsider's vision.

*Suggested work*

- Reconstruct as exactly as possible, the route taken by Alou, and the means of transportation used. The use of a map is indispensable.
- Describe the crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar and the very real dangers involved.
- Describe his first contact with Spain: how he was welcomed, his first job, first difficulties encountered.
- “A thousand tasks, a thousand miseries”, a list could be made of all of the work that Alou has to do: what do the tasks have in common, why some are more satisfying than others? Explain.
- The suffering and humiliations of Alou: distinguish between the problems related to bad material conditions and bad conditions created by men. Are there any racial incidents in the film and if so, when?
- Discuss Alou's joy and happiness – loves and friendship.
- Discuss the struggles of illegal immigrants.

**Additional research** could be carried out on the anti-immigrant riots which took place in southern Spain in 1999, and European legislation on immigration.



## Journey of hope (*Voyage vers l'espoir*) by Xavier Koller

Switzerland, 1990, colour, 105 min.

*Themes: migratory phenomena – relations between the sexes*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Xavier Koller, a young Swiss film-maker, got the idea for this film from the growing number of tragedies connected with illegal immigration reported in the papers. He not only secured the invaluable help of the Turkish writer Ferid Cicekoglú, but also researched the subject in depth. **The screenplay** is based on the background material he himself collected, and this gives the film a semi-documentary authenticity, with no false pathos.

In 1991, *Journey of hope* took the most coveted of all awards – the Oscar for best foreign-language film. The prize – unexpected, but well-deserved – turned it into a box-office success.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Haydar is a poor farmer in a mountain village in Anatolia, where life is very hard. His brother Cemal has already emigrated and is working in Switzerland. Lured by his example and full of illusions about the miracles possible in this Swiss paradise, Haydar takes a fateful decision. Ignoring his wife Meryem's anxieties and his parents' reproaches, he sells everything he owns to pay for the long journey to the promised land, and sets off, taking his wife and eldest son, Mehmet Ali, with him.

But the family quickly discovers the harsh realities of illegal immigration. After crossing to Italy in a cargo-ship's filthy hold, they carry on by lorry to the Swiss border. The discomfort and physical hardships are bad enough, but they also suffer constant harassment and humiliation – not to mention the ever-present fear of being caught. They need traffickers to cross the last border, and have to accept all their demands.

**Choices and perspective.** The film is neither diatribe nor caricature, but sets out to give a clear, unembellished picture. It does not try to play on the public's emotions or target individuals (the traffickers are crooks, but poor wretches too, and sometimes as much to be pitied as their victims; the Swiss officials are not brutes, but public employees who have to follow the rules). Instead, it lays bare

the implacable workings of the mass migration process triggered by economic globalisation. Its sober, straightforward approach makes it particularly useful in the classroom.

*Suggestions for work*

- The reasons for the departure. Why are these simple people dazzled by Switzerland's prosperity, real or imagined? What are the components of this "Swiss dream"? What are Haydar and Meryem trying to escape, and from what are they trying to save their children? How do others react to their plans – what are their arguments, for or against? Discuss the validity of these arguments, bearing in mind the situation of the people using them, such as the parents.
- Reconstruct the travellers' route as accurately as possible, and list the types of transport used. This will necessarily involve working with maps.
- Discuss the sufferings and humiliations endured by the family. Make a distinction between problems due to harsh physical conditions and those for which other people (traffickers, seamen, customs officials) are directly responsible. Does the film heap blame on these people? Why? Does it show blatant cases of racism? When?
- Comment on the film's conclusion. Could it have ended differently? What is its overall message?

**Additional areas of study** could be emigration from Turkey; European immigration law; newspaper reports of tragedies connected with illegal immigration networks.

## Second generation soul-searching

### Introduction

It is significant that, since the end of the 1980s, French cinema has produced a whole series of films dealing with the plight of young, second-generation immigrants – problems at school, the difficulty of finding jobs and keeping them, the rebellious feelings nurtured by their outer-city environment, and their defiant sense of belonging to two cultures. Nearly all the young directors of these films are themselves the children of immigrants. Karim Dridi (*Bye-bye*) and Malik Chibane (*Hexagone* – that is France, from the country's shape) are two of the most promising. Christophe Ruggia's *The kid from Chaâba* (*Le gone du Chaâba*) (France, 1998) is different in two ways – it is set in the 1960s, and Ruggia himself is not of North African immigrant origin. Both factors give the film a certain distance from its subject – which may partly account for its interest.



## The kid from Chaâba (Le gone du Chaâba) by Christophe Ruggia

France, 1997, colour, 96 min.

Themes: immigration – integration – children’s rights – the right to education

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** This was Christophe Ruggia’s first full-length fiction film. The young French director admits to being bowled over by Azouz Begag’s original novel: “I’m not Algerian and I’ve never lived in a slum. That was the first – obvious – thought that hit me when I closed the book. The next – just as obvious – was that I was going to spend the next few years of my life turning it into a film.”<sup>1</sup>

**The screenplay** is very closely based on Azouz Begag’s autobiographical novel of the same name. The book is a sincere, heart-warming account of a little immigrant’s childhood in France. Hugely hard as it is to integrate in French society, Begag’s own ascent has been meteoric – thanks to a brilliant school and university career and his powerful urge to write. A sociologist by training, he has made a name for himself with his essays and novels. The screen version of his story rings totally true because of countless real-life details, scenes no one could invent – small, revealing things, kept alive by his keen childhood memories.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The setting is a small shanty-town on the outskirts of Lyon in the early 1960s. The immigrant families who live there have fled from war and poverty in Algeria – but their new living conditions, in what they call the “chaâba”, are far from ideal. Their accommodation is ramshackle and comfortless, and has none of the usual amenities. The parents work hard. All too often, the children end up playing on muddy waste ground with broken objects picked up on the city’s rubbish dumps.

In spite of all these problems, little Omar does very well at school. His father, who deeply regrets being illiterate himself, urges him strongly to study – and particularly to read. And so Omar tries to get as far as he can – to outdo the native-born kids (“gonés” in local slang). This is to be his revenge for the social

1. Interview quoted in *Fiches AFCAE du cinema, promotion jeune public*, May 1998.

injustice and the countless handicaps he suffers. His efforts earn him the incomprehension, and sometimes hostility, of his friends, who accuse him of running after French values and culture and betraying his own roots. His big brother, for one, is more interested in the girl next door than his homework.

Omar has a cousin of the same age, Hacène. The two boys are very close – they play together and share their dreams. But Hacène’s father is caught up in the daily struggle to survive and thinks school a waste of time: while Omar succeeds in his studies, Hacène loses interest and slides inexorably towards failure.

At last, the family is given a flat on a big council estate. For Omar, leaving the shanty town marks the end of childhood. He has his future mapped out: “Now I’m going to work, read and write”. He will build a life for himself in France, even if this means turning his back on the family’s long-cherished dream of returning to Algeria.

**Choices and perspective.** “The thing that interests me most in this freely adapted story is the part books play in opening Omar’s eyes and getting this kid from an immigrant family to see his life and the world around him in new terms. It’s a process which takes him to the point where he’s totally alone, face to face with himself, and having no one to talk to becomes so unbearable that he just has to start writing. Writing’s a world in itself – and it saves him from ending up like most of his friends, crushed between their parents’ culture and the culture of a country which merely puts up with them.” (Christophe Ruggia)<sup>1</sup>

#### *Suggestions for work*

- What does the juxtaposition of the words, “gone” and “chaâba”, in the film’s title symbolise?
- Describe living conditions in the shanty town.
- Links with Algerian culture. For Omar, what are the clearest traces and signs of Algerian culture? Does the family really pass on Algerian lore, behaviour patterns and customs? How? What role does the radio play? (What would normally replace the radio today?)
- Does the film say anything about the importance of the Islamic religion in the life of the child and his community? Comment on this.
- In the film, school holds the key to integration. Describe the main processes involved. Would there be the same reason for optimism today? Give reasons for your answer. What other paths to integration are there now?
- Analyse Omar’s relationship with his parents and friends.
- Why can the film be regarded as a film on the “collective memory” of France’s immigrant communities?

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1. *Ibid.*

## My son the fanatic by Udayan Prasad

*Great Britain, 1998, colour, 97 min.*

*Themes: immigration – integration – second generation – relations between the sexes*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Udayan Prasad is himself a second-generation Indian immigrant, and has lived in England since the age of 9. After studying art in Leeds, he attended the National Film and Television School, going on to make a number of documentaries and films for television. In 1996, he completed his first full-length feature, *Brothers in trouble*, already working with the actor Om Puri, which first made his name outside Britain.

The screenplay is very closely based on a short story by the British writer, Hanif Kureishi. Kureishi, the son of a Bombay Indian, was born in London in the 1950s, and the story reflects his own concerns. As quoted in *La Liberation*, “I can’t close my eyes to religious fundamentalism. I don’t like the way the fundamentalists think and behave – but one can’t ignore the problem. Many young people are attracted by fundamentalism, because it gives them a sense of identity and brotherhood. I think this very simplistic world-view answers a whole lot of questions: it is reassuring, leaves no place for doubt, and completely does away with scepticism.” (Hanif Kureishi)

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Parvez is a Pakistani taxi-driver in Bradford. His life is not an easy one. He works hard, at night, and earns very little – unlike many other Pakistanis, who are making fortunes running restaurants. Far from being discontented or embittered, however, he loves everything about England, his adopted country. To fill his sleepless nights, he likes talking to his regular customers, especially Bettina, a young prostitute, who often uses his taxi.

At home, however, the struggle to make ends meet and the lack of prospects are wearing down his family’s morale. Mino, his wife, is depressed and finds England hard to take. But his main worry is his son, Farid – whose adolescent crisis is complicated by the search for an ethnic identity and confused religious yearnings. Harshly dismissive of his father’s clumsy attempts to integrate into British society, Farid turns to hard-and-fast fundamentalism, denouncing

western hedonism and materialism, and his own father's readiness to compromise with the "infidels". He even sells his belongings and breaks off with his European fiancée. He persuades his father to take a Pakistani fundamentalist into the family home. Parvez, who gets no support from his wife, feels daily more isolated. Increasingly, he confides in Bettina, the prostitute, and ends up falling in love with her.

**Choices and perspective.** Because the film's authors – writer and director – personally know the situation it depicts, the risk of a simplistic, black/white vision is avoided. Starting from a screenplay potentially open to misinterpretation and racist distortion (in one direction or the other), director Udayan Prasad is outstanding on two counts: first of all, his clever choice of players from a wide range of backgrounds (Om Puri is a huge star in India and a first-rate actor, while Australian Rachel Griffiths is brilliant as Bettina the young prostitute), and his meticulous direction of their true-to-life performances; secondly, his ability to convey the infinite complexity of the film's situations without over-simplifying them. The audience is constantly made aware of the various levels on which the characters clash: race, class, caste, culture – these (not to mention the generation gap) are the elements in a complex process of identity-building. Udayan Prasad condemns no one, but – often humorously, sometimes sombrely – helps his audience to understand this complex mesh of interlocking destinies, all of them marked by exile.

*In the United Kingdom, hesitation between two cultures: hovering between tears and laughter*

One could ask if films dealing with the lives of Indian or Pakistani immigrant families are becoming a separate genre, in British cinema? It is worth comparing this recent film with the following one, *East is East* (bizarrely titled *Fish and chips* in France).

*(See the fact sheet for the following film for comparative work on the two films.)*



## East is East by Damien O'Donnell

*Great Britain, 1999, colour, 96 min.*

*Themes: immigration – integration – generation gap – rejection of immigrant community values and parental authority*

**The director.** Damien O'Donnell, born in Dublin, made a name for himself with his first film, a good-natured comedy about a boy's mishaps at his new school. In his second, *East is East*, he brings his undoubted skills to bear on a far more serious subject, but one which he treats lightly, combining moments of genuine emotion with occasionally facile humour.

**The plot.** George Khan is of Pakistani origin and proud of it. He owns a rather scruffy fish and chip shop in Salford, a town in northern England. He works hard for a living, with the efficient help of Ella, his lively, kind-hearted English wife. His strict, authoritarian raising of their seven children has earned him the nickname "Genghis". In fact, behind his macho moustache and fierce looks, Genghis is not so bad. But he is determined to turn his children (especially the boys) into good little Pakistanis – and, with an old friend, has fixed up a traditional arranged marriage for his eldest son. The fact that bride and groom have never met doesn't matter ... a son must obey his father.

But this is the England of 1971. A cultural revolution is sweeping the country, with the songs of the Beatles and Rolling Stones to back it, and George's children are more interested in mini-skirts and sexual liberation than the modest veils of Pakistani tradition. Emma may love and respect her domestic tyrant of a husband, but she also wants to see her children happy. Emotional and cultural clashes are inevitable. The wedding, for which George has been waiting so long, may well go seriously wrong.

*Suggested comparative work for My son the fanatic and East is East*

These two films have a certain number of points in common which the following questions will reveal.

- What community created by immigration to Great Britain is represented in the two narratives? Where do these men come from? What are the historical and economic conditions that led to this population flow? Are there any specific allusions to the past of the characters before their arrival in Great Britain?

- What are the professions, functions, social status of the first wave of immigrants? What conclusions can be drawn from this? What future for their children is evoked in the two films?
- What great actor of Indian origin plays in both films? Why is the choice of this actor to play the role of the father in *East is East* both humorous and moral at the same time?

However, the two stories take place at different times. Determine if this chronological difference is important and explain why.

Each of the two films in its own way, highlights the contradictions in these communities, which are torn between British modernity and loyalty to their traditions, between the disappointments resulting from the difficulty of integrating into their host society and the dangerous temptation to live in a closed community.

Identify the various situations which most clearly illustrate these contradictions.

- For example, show how community religious traditions (such as prayer, forbidden foods, celebrations and ceremonies) are respected and by which members of the community.
- On the other hand, show how the relatively liberal mores of Great Britain confront different members of the community and how they succumb or resist.
- Is British society depicted as welcoming and attractive for immigrants and their children? Point out incidents of racism as well as tolerant and open attitudes.

Neither film claims to be a sociological study.

Study how, as in all true comedies, the resources of Love and Laughter are used to offset the on-the-edge tension and contradictions, which in real life are much more dramatic.

## **IV. HUMAN RIGHTS**



## Introduction

The protection of human rights is one of the cornerstones of European construction. At the same time it is a never-ending struggle, where the ideal always remains to be attained, both for states bogged down by complex political problems, in which immediate effectiveness too often takes priority over principles, and for civil societies, in which attitudes change at varying rates. Education in human rights, whether as part of history, civics or legal courses, must therefore continue to be one of the major objectives of European education systems.

In this context, the use of fiction films is obviously not intended to replace other more conventional means of imparting knowledge and stimulating thought. But it does have one particular advantage: adolescents (and they are not the only ones) often do not take kindly to what appears to them to be moralising education, when they are faced with the brutality of social relations, the cynicism of the business world or official lies on a daily basis.

Fiction films (as long as they are carefully selected) portray concrete situations that have been dramatised and put into “entertainment” form, in which the characters, with whom adolescents can often identify, are brought face to face with problems which affect them emotionally and intellectually. The right to be different; alienation through certain forms of work; torture and the death penalty; the prison system; the right to information; discrimination against minorities; oppression of women; religious intolerance and racial hatred are among the topics dealt with. This opens up a whole new sphere of teaching through the imaginary based on “democratic” class practices, for although it is up to teachers to put the various problems broached into perspective by informing their students of the social and historical parameters, above all, they must initiate a well-argued debate on the validity and significance of the issues raised and the legal, political or social solutions proposed. The students will participate all the more enthusiastically in this debate, as the film will have fired them with emotion and provided a basis for discussion.

From this point of view, it is even less the intention than in the three previous themes to offer universal models of films to be studied and questions to be raised. Each teacher, to the best of her or his knowledge and belief, and taking account of the demands of national curricula, will have to choose which subjects to deal with and which approaches to take. The European films proposed here have only one thing in common, and that is that they have all been shown to school audiences and served as a basis for discussion and civic education. They deal with very different subjects from very different points of view. They are no more or less than modest case studies, which simply stimulate a desire to see and understand.



## Children's rights

### Shoeshine (Sciuscià) by Vittorio De Sica

*Italy, 1946, B/W, 90 min.*

*Themes: abandoned children – juvenile delinquency – prison conditions*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Vittorio De Sica was born in Sora, Italy, in 1902 and died in Neuilly, France, in 1974. He was one of the strongest personalities in Italian cinema. The son of a judge, he first made a reputation as an actor in numerous comedies in the 1930s that Italian film critics called *telefoni bianchi* (“white telephones”), superficial, light comedies often set in luxurious apartments that showed absolutely no concern for social issues, in which he played dandies or casual womanisers. He turned to film direction in 1940, making interesting films which, in retrospect, show early signs of neo-realism. From 1944 to 1952, he played a vital role in this movement, which is central to Italian cinema: *Shoeshine*, made in 1946, was one of the films that launched the neo-realist movement along with Rossellini’s *Rome, open city* (*Roma, città aperta*) and Visconti’s *The earth trembles* (*La terra trema*). He returned to and developed these aesthetic and political considerations in *The bicycle thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948).

**The screenplay.** Cesare Zavattini collaborated very closely with Vittorio De Sica and helped him to give expression to all his skills. Zavattini belonged to the same generation as De Sica and had started out as a journalist. His experience in this field partly explains his taste for authenticity and the details of everyday life. These traits were already apparent in a number of novels which he had published before the war. He came to be seen as one of the spiritual leaders of the neo-realist movement and had a hand in many of its most notable successes. The fiction of *Shoeshine* is nourished by countless real facts, although they are, in a sense, condensed to meet the requirements of the narrative.

**Public reaction.** *Shoeshine* was badly received in Italy for a number of reasons. Some people refused to accept the depressing reality portrayed in the film and expressed pseudo-patriotic indignation at the negative image it gave of Italy, whereas others from less privileged social groups simply wanted to see more entertaining films, precisely because they sought to escape from that very same reality. However, the film enjoyed widespread international success, especially in France and the United States, where critical acclaim brought fame to the filmmakers and opened the door for Hollywood investment in future co-productions. Today, *Shoeshine* is considered to be one of the classics of neo-realist cinema.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Rome, at the end of the second world war. In an Italy ravaged by the conflict, all energy is channelled into the struggle for survival. Children, orphans living in the streets, are the principal victims of poverty. Giuseppe and Pasquale, two young Roman boys who live by their wits alone, shine the shoes of American soldiers (the Italian word *sciuscìa*, the title of the film, is a deformation of “shoeshine”). They dream of buying a horse. In order to earn a little more money, they often become involved in petty black-market dealing. By selling stolen American blankets, they are unwittingly drawn into a much more serious scheme run by adults. Although they manage to buy their much-coveted horse, they are caught by the police and sent to a detention centre. It turns out to be a real prison, where children awaiting trial are crowded in appalling hygienic conditions. The law of the strongest reigns, the biggest and most brutal children rule over the others. The boys refuse to give the names of the adults who drew them into the dealings, but the wardens cunningly obtain their confession. They pretend to beat Giuseppe; Pasquale, hearing screams coming from a neighbouring room, tells the wardens what they want to know but he is then spurned by Giuseppe, who considers him a traitor.

Poorly defended at the trial, Pasquale is sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, whereas Giuseppe only gets one year. Giuseppe manages to escape during a film screened to entertain the inmates. Pasquale, seeking revenge, leads the police to Giuseppe’s hiding place. The two boys’ final confrontation ends tragically.

**Choices and perspective.** The film is a very good example of the neo-realist movement which, in the post-war period, endeavoured to paint a lucid and rigorous picture of Italy’s social problems. Highly talented directors dealt with issues such as the underdevelopment of southern Italy, the Mezzogiorno (in *The earth trembles*), unemployment and its consequences (in *The bicycle thieves*) and the problems facing rural areas (in *Bitter rice – Riso amaro*). These directors, out of a concern for authenticity and through lack of funding, advocated the systematic use of natural settings and non-professional actors.

The determination to give a realistic account does not mean that the film is devoid of emotional content, and De Sica’s warmth towards the characters comes across clearly in the film. He is tender and affectionate in his portrayal of ordinary, humble people who, through their tragic destinies, have greatness thrust upon them.

### *Children, the victims of a period of extreme hardship*

#### 1. *The drama of the economic and social situation in Italy at the end of the war*

The film depicts a specific, real situation in great detail:

- Direct references to galloping inflation and the ubiquitous black market can be identified.



- The presence of American soldiers: what major characteristics of the American “occupation” are portrayed? In particular, how are the American soldiers depicted – as being in a dominant position or as dispensers of material wealth that had hitherto been inaccessible (chocolate, for example)? In what way do they convey the cultural models that were destined to be so successful? What makes these rich and powerful victors so fascinating to the Italians?

## 2. *Persecuted children*

- How did they get into this situation?
- What specific forms of juvenile delinquency are shown in the film? Gangs of young people were to be found all over Europe after the second world war, but their delinquency was a direct result of the hardship of the period, the widespread misery, the physical, not simply psychological, disappearance of their parents and the absence of effective schooling. Delinquency figures fell steadily from 1948 to 1954 as relative prosperity returned.
- Is the prison system adapted to its juvenile inmates? The material conditions and the psychological means used to pressurise people into submission should also be studied.
- The consequences of imprisonment on the characters: violence, corruption, betrayal, broken friendship.
- The children’s relations with the adults are complex and often very tough.

## 3. *The neo-realist viewpoint*

- What are the main techniques typical of neo-realism that are used in the film?
- How does the director combine rigorous description with warmth of feeling?
- Does the melodramatic story override the social comment made by the film?

**Critique of the film** through a comparison with other documents. It would be interesting to conduct a study of juvenile delinquency and how it is dealt with under criminal law and in the courts in each of the countries concerned. Europe in 2001 is very different from Italy in 1945. What major scandals continue to occur in this field?



## Father and master (Padre padrone) by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani

*Italy, 1977, colour, 115 min.*

*Themes: children's rights – family relationships – the right to education*

### A. Background to the film

**The directors.** Paolo and Vittorio Taviani were born in 1931 and 1929 respectively. Such lasting, harmonious collaboration between brothers is rare in all the arts and the cinema is no exception. Yet in the 40 years they worked together, beginning with their first documentary film in 1960, the Taviani brothers built up a unique collection of films which all bear the hallmark of political and social thinking. They seem to have had a particular taste for historical films, a genre to which their most successful films, such as *Allonsanfan*, *Night of the shooting stars (La notte di San Lorenzo)* and *Chaos (Kaos)*, belong. However, they did not make so many films about their country's recent past simply because of a liking for period costumes, but because important questions are still to be answered concerning the origins of modern Italy.

**The screenplay** is a faithful adaptation of Gavino Ledda's autobiography. Gavino was born into one of the poorest of all the poor families living in an isolated Sardinian village. Forced by a brutal father to watch over the flocks in the mountains, he received practically no schooling. When he was called up for national service, he was declared illiterate and he seized the opportunity to catch up on his education. In just a few years, he became a brilliant academic. It was then that he decided to write his story in order to bear witness to the extraordinary changes in his life, but also as a means of coming to terms with his still painful past. The Taviani brothers, while respecting the framework of Gavino's book, emphasised two aspects: the first part of the film gives a detailed, documentary-like account of daily life in rural Sardinia in the middle of the century, whereas the second part, militant in the noble sense of the word, is a sort of manifesto for making education and culture available to all.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** An isolated hamlet in the Sardinian mountains, where nothing has changed for centuries, in the 1950s. Families cling to a barren land, eking out a precarious existence solely reliant on a pastoral economy. Life is hard for everyone, but particularly for the children, who are put to work as soon as possible.

The young Gavino is subjected to the tyrannical authority of an often violent father, who took him away from school at an early age to watch over the family's sheep and goats. High up in the mountain pastures, far from the village, the child is no stranger to cold, deprivation and loneliness. With only the animals for company, he has no friends and can expect no sign of affection or help from anyone in this harsh environment. He fears rather than looks forward to his father's rare visits, marked by brutality.

During these long years of isolation, Gavino grows into a taciturn youth, an illiterate little savage forever subject to his father's harsh authority.

But the call-up for compulsory national service provides him with an opportunity to escape: the entrance tests show his illiteracy, but also his intellectual quickness. The young man's case arouses the interest of an officer who undertakes to teach him to read and write and make up for his immense lack of education. Gavino's desire to learn is phenomenal; it is as if he has been reborn.

**Choices and perspective.** The film is intended to be a denunciation of the intellectual and moral degradation that accompanies poverty, a cry of hope for the emancipating virtues of knowledge and education, a manifesto for making culture available to all, so that each and every person may achieve their full potential and human dignity. From all viewpoints it will be important to gauge how today's adolescents react to this austere and yet lyrical film, which is both a realist documentary and idealist manifesto, as they often see compulsory schooling more as a prison sentence than as a means for their own emancipation.

### *Analysis of the film*

1. *Pastoral economy, an ancient way of life in the Mediterranean islands*
  - By carefully observing the landscapes in the film and referring to other relevant documents, identify the constraints of the environment (poor soil, dryness of the summer, bushy vegetation) which long condemned small, rural communities to rely on their flocks for survival.
  - In the modern era of mass tourism, many European teenagers may have an idealised impression of life in the Mediterranean. It would be worthwhile using the film to confront these new, touristic stereotypes with the harsh reality of a not-so-distant past.
  - Sardinia could be used as an example for studying how the handicaps and difficulties of the environment have become assets for economic development. What might Gavino, the young shepherd, be like today, and what aid would the farmers of the Mediterranean islands be receiving from the European Union? How would this thankless and laborious way of life, which has almost completely disappeared, be seen in the light of modern ecological awareness? Can we be sensitive to the bitter beauty of the limestone landscapes?

## 2. *The archaic patriarchal system*

- Gavino's father is portrayed as being particularly hateful. Study the ways in which he uses oppression to rule over his family, especially Gavino.
- Although he is a brute, the father is first and foremost a product of an economic and social system which grants unlimited authority to the head of the family clan. Can he, too, be considered to be a victim?
- Which scene, splendid from a cinematographic point of view but almost unbearable to watch, stresses the father's bestiality? Can the Taviani brothers' view be challenged, and if so, why?
- How does Gavino's father react to his son's social rise? How does he welcome him when he returns home?

## 3. *Emancipation through knowledge*

- How does Gavino's illiteracy, the result of his oppression, strengthen the bonds of his submission?
- What local authority or state bodies are severely lacking in the little peasant community? Find historical and geographical parallels with this situation. For example, when was primary education really made available in rural areas in Europe? What bodies in the various countries have been responsible for these areas? Using Unesco statistics, make a map showing illiteracy throughout the world.
- Was national service invented by the nation-state? Can a parallel be drawn with the establishment of state schools? If so, what other purposes, not always officially declared, would be served by introducing mass education?
- Special attention should be paid to the different stages in Gavino's brilliant career. How does he gradually attain freedom, from his first lessons to his university studies? In what way is he able to change his relationships with the members of his family, especially his father, when he returns to the village?
- What is the film's basic message? Does it correspond with the director's aesthetic and narrative choices? Give some examples of the direction techniques used.



## Workers' rights

### The organizer (I compagni) by Mario Monicelli

*Italy/France, 1963, B/W, 130 min.*

*Themes: industrial revolutions – the conditions of the working class – the alienation of workers in an industrial society – social conflict – migrants – the condition of women*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Mario Monicelli, born in 1915, is a major figure in Italian comedy. He is, if not the master, then one of the funniest and most prolific of all film directors. From his first films in 1949, in which he directed the extravagant comic genius Toto, to his most recent works, Mario Monicelli has been the king of laughter, which he is capable of raising with every possible comic technique, from the grossest clowning to the most subtle wit. But he is also a careful observer of society who shows a tender interest in the fate of the humble and those who are left out in the cold. Small-time swindlers, petty thieves, dropouts and misfits, the “lowest of the lower middle classes” whose dreams have been shattered: a whole range of colourful characters people Monicelli’s films. Although the director uses their misadventures to amuse us, emotion is never far from our laughter. Monicelli’s view of society is more committed than appears at first sight.

**The screenplay and context at the time of shooting.** That a director of comedy films should broach such a serious subject of social history, the workers’ struggle in Italy at the beginning of the century, might seem surprising. Monicelli had already dealt with modern Italian history in *The Great War (La grande guerra)*, a film he had made four years earlier, in 1959. This story of two shirkers who were shot by mistake and became heroes in spite of themselves had shown his mastery in achieving just the right balance of comedy and tragedy. Monicelli thought that laughter was a weapon that could be used in more demanding works.

Monicelli was the first great Italian film director to make a film about the workers’ struggle, but the time was right. Italy in the 1960s was marked by economic growth and enduring social inequality. The rural exodus to the industrial suburbs of the cities in the north of the peninsula emptied the countryside of the Mezzogiorno. This was the subject chosen by Luchino Visconti in 1960 for his magnificent film *Rocco and his brothers (Rocco e i suoi fratelli)*. The number of employees, especially workers in Italian industry was growing. The workers’ movement was powerful, ready to fight, organised by strong trade unions and

backed by the Italian Communist Party, which had the support of the working-class electorate and, a vital element, intellectuals, including many film-makers.

So it is not really surprising that at that time, an observer as attentive as Monicelli should plan to make a film on the working class struggles of the past. The tragic end to the strike is not seen as a defeat, but as a promise, and the textile workers did not go down in history as having been vanquished, but as fore-runners.

Reaction to the film would no doubt be different today.

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** The film is based on historical events that are well known in Italy: one of the country's first major strikes by Turin textile workers in 1900, which ended in tragedy.

Working conditions are hard in the vast workshops, amid the deafening roar of the looms, and workers' earnings in return for endless hours of labour are derisory. Following a serious industrial accident, the textile workers go to the factory manager with their demands. They are clumsy, intimidated and divided as to the approach they should take, and are waved away with threats of sanctions. However, they are given help by the local schoolteacher and Professor Sinigaglia, a militant socialist who has come from Genoa for that very purpose. As a result, the workers organise themselves; the strike starts and sets in. Their bosses call in strike breakers, tension mounts and violent fighting breaks out, in the course of which one worker is killed. Discouragement gradually spreads to most of the workers. The professor manages to rally the most determined workers and they set off to occupy the factories. However, they run up against an army detachment, which does not hesitate to open fire. The professor is taken to prison and the workers' leaders are forced to flee and hide. The embittered strikers return to work.

**Choices and perspective.** The film is made in the style of a highly detailed and rigorous documentary, incorporating accounts, archives and photographs from the period. The decision to film in black and white, echoing the photographs of the beginning of the century shown during the opening credits, emphasises the director's determination to give the film as authentic an appearance as possible. At the same time, the film makes an intelligent analysis of the events without giving way to populist demagogy or revolutionary pseudo-lyricism. It shows the workers' limitations and shortcomings, their leaders' illusions and the mistakes made by the socialist intellectuals, without neglecting to point out the heavy responsibilities of the factory owners and the authorities, who preferred confrontation to negotiation.

Monicelli manages to avoid the pitfalls of didacticism. Thanks to his experience in Italian comedies and the remarkable performances of the actors (especially Marcello Mastroianni's astonishing portrayal of the little socialist professor), he brings the characters alive with dozens of details from everyday life which,



despite the seriousness of the subject, are often humorous or even burlesque. In so doing, he imbues this humanist film with a warmth that makes it especially suitable for school audiences.

**A sequence for study:** the opening sequence (length: 11 minutes).

The scene takes place early one morning in a simple worker's cottage, damp and cold. At the sound of the factory siren, the family gets up. The elder brother and sister go to work in the nearby textiles factory. The camera follows them into a huge workshop, where dozens of weaving looms are being started up, making a dreadful din, under the unfriendly gaze of the foremen.

The working day seems endless. At midday, the workers quickly eat their lunch, sitting in the cold courtyard. The audience gets to know them. A woman is waiting for a worker at the factory gates with their baby, whom he otherwise never has time to see.

The workers return to their looms, growing more and more tired as the day wears on ... Suddenly, there is an accident!

This opening sequence contains a wealth of subjects for study in class.

A series of specific questions on the following will enable the scene to be set.

- Living conditions: the insalubrious state of the house, the lighting, heating, toilet facilities, allusions to the poor pay on which families had to survive the week, the meagre breakfast, etc.
- The working conditions in Turin at the beginning of the century: working hours, the workshops, the type of work to be done, the dangers involved, lack of safety, the brotherly feelings between workers, the presence of the foremen.
- Students should identify the character of the migrant worker from the south of Italy, the Mezzogiorno, and comment on his behaviour. Why doesn't he eat with the others? Why is he so taciturn? Explain his nickname and the other workers' attitude towards him.

A similar study could be made of the female characters and their relationships with the men.

Or, using other diachronic and synchronic documentary sources, a study could be made of:

- The significance of the historical reconstitution. Which of the conditions shown or implied in the extract have remained the same and which have changed?
- The director's point of view: clues to this are given in the screenplay and the direction of the actors. He obviously sympathises with the workers, but does not indulge in excessive idealism (the gentle derision typical of Italian comedy; picaresque portraits).

The class could also be asked to decipher the most easily identified references to the 1960s.



## Metropolis by Fritz Lang

*Germany, 1926, B/W, silent, various lengths: usual version 110 min.*

*Themes: a portrayal of industrial society and its inequalities – the alienation of the world of work – a vision of a totalitarian society*

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Fritz Lang is one of the most famous German film directors. He made some of the finest films of the 1920s and early 1930s, including the two *Die Nibelungen* films (*Siegfried* and *Kriemhild's revenge*) and the *Dr Mabuse* cycle, and made a brilliant transition to talking films with *M* (*M – eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*) in 1931. In 1933, he fled Nazi Germany and went to Hollywood. He made a new series of masterpieces in American studios before returning to Germany at the end of his life. He is recognised as one of the masters of world cinema. The French New Wave paid him tribute at the beginning of the 1960s.

**The screenplay** was written by Fritz Lang and his then wife Thea von Harbou. It has come to light that the ideological ambiguities and slow narrative of some of the scenes were the work of this novelist and screenwriter, who, at the time, displayed some affinity for certain ideas developed by the Nazis on Germanic identity and a deep-seated rejection of Marxist theory.

**Public reaction.** The German public which was lucky enough to see the film when it was released in 1926 seems to have greeted it enthusiastically. Although the film was soon mutilated by repeated re-editing by American companies which exploited it commercially, it remains a classic. Even today, any screening of one of its versions (for example, the restored version with a new score by an Italian composer) is something of an event, and the film is the subject of genuine curiosity on the part of cinephiles, especially students, with some of whom it has achieved cult-film status.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** In a city in the 21st century, the social classes are ruthlessly segregated into two worlds: the “upper world”, where a few privileged people live a life of luxury and decadent idleness under the control of the Engineer, the true master of the City, and the “lower world”, a closed, subterranean world where the working masses are at the service of an enormous machine which devours their work-

ing strength. One day, the Engineer's son notices a beautiful woman from "below" who has come to the upper level with a group of children. Can love break down the class barriers as an unscrupulous scientist is building a robot that will eventually replace all the workers?

**Choices and perspective.** The film's storyline should be studied as a parable on the need for workers and bosses to unite, or on the essential role of love in human relationships. The cumbersome caricature of the subject might legitimately cause some irritation today. As mentioned above, Thea von Harbou was responsible for this suspect ponderousness. But the real value of the film lies in the extraordinary work done in making the film's visually superb and often fascinating images. The depiction of the City, the industrial world and the condition of the working masses are extremely worthwhile studying with adolescents.

It is also worth studying the fantastic sets, most of which are models, and their place in the history of imaginary architecture.

As it is impossible to study the whole of this lavish film in class, two or three sequences should be chosen for viewing (for example, the presentation of the City, the industrial accident at the central machine and the final touches to the robot).

#### *Other suggestions for research*

- Analysis of a portrayal in the various sequences in the film: a vision of industrial society, as it could be imagined in 1926.
- What is "science fiction"? Establish what books and comics students have read and films they have seen on this subject and what they know about and its main themes. Do students today consider that *Metropolis* belongs to this genre?
- In what ways does whatever is known at a given time serve as a basis for visions of the future? In this case, the director's imagination is obviously fed by the first industrial revolution: a vision of heavy industry based on steam-power (huge boilers, gushing smoke, enormous wheels and dials) and the exploitation of vast masses of subjugated labourers.
- The fantasy of an American-style city. At the beginning of the 1920s, what do the vertical architecture and traffic flows at different heights refer to? The models of buildings, vehicles, aeroplanes, etc., should help to answer this question.
- Describe and analyse the activation of the robot. A study could be made of the literary origins of the robot and the forms robots are given in films. Students should also be encouraged to reflect on the "transformation into automats" of the working masses brought about by Taylorism and the advent of production lines precisely in the 1920s and 1930s.
- The glimpses we have today of what the post-industrial society of 2026 will be like are very different from Fritz Lang's vision a hundred years previ-

ously. What are the greatest differences in the fields of industrial production, man-machine relationships, and the division into social classes and the conflicts that may arise as a result?

- The portrayal of a totalitarian society. On what criteria can the society shown in the film be called totalitarian? What arguments are there against this assessment? What are the factors of and opportunities for resistance to oppression, and in which sectors does it spring up?

**Critical comparison.** Just a few years after *Metropolis*, two other major films portrayed, in a very different register, the alienation of workers subjected to new production methods and standards. These two films, *Freedom for us (A nous la liberté, 1931)* by René Clair and *Modern times, 1936*, by Charlie Chaplin also contain famous sequences depicting human enslavement to the machine. It would be fascinating to compare these sequences with the industrial world of *Metropolis*.



## The right to difference, respect for minorities, protection against intolerance

### Hunting scenes from Bavaria (Jagdszenen aus Niederbayern) by Peter Fleischmann

*West Germany, 1969, B/W, 88 min.*

*Themes: fascism on a daily basis – collective intolerance – respect of difference – the scapegoat*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Peter Fleischmann was born in the Palatinate in 1937. He studied at the IDHEC (the French Institute of Higher Cinematographic Studies) in Paris from 1962 to 1964. He worked as assistant to several directors, in particular Jacques Rozier. In 1968, he made a documentary feature film on German youth. *Hunting scenes from Bavaria* was his second film and an undeniable success.

**The screenplay** was written by Peter Fleischmann and based on a play by Martin Sperr. Sperr, a Bavarian himself, knew the region very well. Although he denied that it had been his intention to describe a specifically Bavarian phenomenon, it should be noted that the NPD neo-nazi party was particularly successful in Bavaria in the elections held at the end of the 1960s and that intellectuals and all democrats were worried by these results. Martin Sperr was also involved in the film, collaborating in the adaptation of his play and playing the part of Abram.

**Public reaction.** The film made a very good impression at the Critics' Week at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival. However, some reservations were expressed in Germany, where the violence of its vision of the Bavarian countryside shocked some sections of the press and the public. Unfortunately, the film was not widely distributed in France or the rest of Europe, being mainly confined to film clubs. And yet it is a powerful film, ahead of its time, on a subject that is still topical, and its aesthetic approach has not aged.

#### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** The story begins on a Sunday, after Mass, in a little Bavarian village. Abram, a big, strong, slightly awkward man returns to the village after a period in town. Tongues begin to wag, saying that he has been in prison, that he does not like women, that perhaps he is "abnormal". Moreover, the young man is the son of a refugee from East Germany, Barbara, who has never been fully accepted by the village community. In short, he is not like the others.

Gradually, the malicious gossip takes effect. The villagers avoid Abram, but spy on him. All sorts of contradictory rumours are spread about him: he is said to have been seen with an adolescent boy, but Hannelore, the loose woman of the village, says that she is pregnant by him. As the days wear on, Abram becomes the village scapegoat. One day, when he has sought refuge in the forest, Hannelore follows him and catches him up. In his panic, he strangles her. The whole village takes part in the ensuing manhunt.

The village festival is not long off. Everyone will have plenty to eat and drink in this beautiful land that God has given them.

**Choices and perspective.** Peter Fleischmann himself wrote the best possible introduction to his film in a text entitled “On everyday fascism” that was published to coincide with the film’s release. “I would be sorry if anyone were to interpret my film in a fatalistic way. In the past, people fought against the plague. Today, they have to fight another enemy, neurosis, and one of its most frequent forms, aggressiveness. The whole world is sick and needs to be cured. Germany has been especially ill ... The nazis put the blame for everything on a few; the Germans blamed only the nazis, and the world blamed only the bad Germans. Everyone accuses a minority and no one will see that a whole people was sick and look for the cause ... Who helps to cure these complexes? Who sees the imbalance that plagues our country and its incapacity to relax, the fear of chaos within us that takes the form of a relentless quest for order?”<sup>1</sup>

Fleischmann’s idea was therefore clearly to study a specific example of mounting aggressiveness and intolerance, the mechanisms that lead to someone different being excluded. He shows us how a community of human beings can construct fascism in its everyday life.

### *Suggestions for work*

1. *A village community closed to the outside world*
  - Such a pretty village: between which events in rural life does the director set the story? Are they times when the whole community gathers together? Happy times? What is the village like in terms of housing, environment, and so forth? What agricultural work is referred to? What is the general atmosphere in the streets?
  - But this community is being gnawed at by a social cancer. A special study could be made of the pig festival, striking in its realism. What can be glimpsed beneath the apparent gaiety and peasants’ japes? Are human relations good? How, and with what vulgar expressions, do a few minor incidents reveal the balance of power and the desire to humiliate that, until then, had been kept hidden?

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1. Extracts from “Du fascisme quotidien”, quoted in an article by André Cornand, in *Revue du cinema*, June 1969, p. 131-32.



2. *The one who is not like the others*

- In what light does the director show Abram to the audience? Does he emphasise that he is different? If so, when, and what methods does he use? It should be noted that the camera reveals very little, but do the villagers know more? What conclusions can be drawn?
- The allusions to Abram’s possible homosexuality are subtle. How are they expressed? What relationship does he have with the village women?
- The character of Barbara, Abram’s mother. How do the villagers use her weaknesses to turn her against her son? What is your opinion of this method? In his introductory text, Fleischmann wrote that “One of the worst atrocities of the concentration camp system was to drive the internees to denounce one another in order to be able to affirm that they were sub-human”.
- The character of Hannelore, the village “whore”. What sort of relationship does she have with Abram? Is she sincere? In what way do the villagers use her as a tool?
- What are the main examples of intolerance in the film?

3. *A metaphorical warning to Germany, or to every human community?*

- In the 1960s, there was a risk that nazi-inspired ideas would reappear in Bavaria or other parts of Germany.
- Comment on this remark by critic André Cornand: “But above all, beyond Germany, evil lies in wait for every community, here or elsewhere, which closes itself to the outside world. Openness to life and culture are the only means of preventing this disease from taking hold”.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Ibid.*



## The old man and the boy (Le vieil homme et l'enfant) by Claude Berri

France, 1967, B/W, 90 min.

Themes: anti-Semitism – the second world war – the generation gap – questions of identity

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Claude Berri, born in 1934, is particularly well known today as a major producer. However, since the mid-1960s, when he directed sketches in films comprising contributions from several directors, he has never lost his taste for directing his own productions and has built up an original catalogue of very autobiographical films. *The old man and the boy* tells of his childhood as a young Jew during the occupation of France; *The man with connections* (*Le pistonné*, 1970) is based on his experience of national service; *The first time* (*La première fois*, 1976) recounts his first love affair, and so on. Of these films, the quality of which varies tremendously, *The old man and the boy* is the most successful and moving. In addition to his penchant for the autobiographical, since the beginning of the 1980s Claude Berri has made a number of films on a wide range of subjects, some of which, like *So long, stooge!* (*Tchao, Pantin!*, 1983) with Coluche and *Germinal*, 1993, with Gérard Depardieu, have been extremely successful with audiences, even though Berri is still frowned upon by French film critics.

**The screenplay** is largely autobiographical. Claude Berri had started by writing a short story based on his childhood memories of France during the war, keeping as close as possible to actual events. The director took the trouble to include the following message to audiences at the beginning of the film: “This is a true story, but it is seen through the imagination of a child whose sensitivity had been heightened by the tragic events going on around him in occupied France. However, the warm affection that he found in the family of good people who took him in has left him with a sort of poetic nostalgia for this period and a deep feeling of gratitude towards these people”.

### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** A family of modest means in Paris: a loving mother and a likeable, but quick-tempered father. Young Claude is 8 years old. He is a lively, intelligent child who likes to hang around the streets with his friends. But these are the dark years of the occupation and the family is Jewish. Claude’s father is angry

because he is afraid that the child's carelessness will put the whole household at risk. He and his wife reluctantly agree to send the child to stay with a friend's elderly parents in the country near Grenoble.

In the heart of untroubled, rural France, the young Claude, shy at first, slowly discovers a life hitherto unknown to him: the open air, nature and animals. The elderly couple looking after him do not know who he really is. This is just as well, as the old man, a veteran of the 1914-18 war, is a fervent admirer of Marshal Pétain and ardently anti-Semitic, at least in words. But he is basically a good man (the character is played by Michel Simon, who gives one of his best performances), who would not hurt a fly. In fact he is vegetarian, to the despair of his wife who is an excellent cook. He quickly becomes extremely fond of the resourceful young boy whom fate has put in his care and who soon calls him "Grandpa". He shares the child's life, covering up for his mischief and teaching him everything he knows about the countryside, feeding rabbits and, of course, those deceitful enemies, the Jews.

**Choices and perspectives.** "The theme of the film is racism. But the difference with other films about Jews is that they have always made people cry or shown atrocities, they have been films with messages. I have dealt with the subject in a humorous and tender way. I wanted to make a love story between an anti-Semite and a Jew. The grandpa represents a fairly run-of-the-mill type of man whose heart is stronger than his ideas, and I attack those ideas, not the man himself." (Claude Berri)

### *Suggestions for work*

1. *A rural France that has since disappeared?*
  - Through the child's eyes, we see a traditional, rural society. The customs, habits, labours and little joys and hardships in every aspect of daily life should be identified. Describe how the meals are prepared making sure that nothing goes to waste, dressing habits and Sunday clothes, sleeping under thick quilts. Identify the main social events of village community life, and so on.
2. *The power of prejudice*
  - In this peaceful part of France, which time seems to have passed by, sinister ideas are nevertheless being circulated. What means are used to spread them (radio, newspapers, rumours, etc.)?
  - Note down all the anti-Semite gossip or prejudice that the grandpa obligingly passes on. What mischievous responses does the film supply?
  - Study the "mirror sequence" carefully. How does the child play on the physical characteristics attributed to the Jews to arouse "grandpa's" doubts

concerning his identity? Beyond the irony, what more serious lesson is taught in this scene?

3. *Humour as a weapon*

- Note the main humorous techniques used by the director.



## Political freedom and political oppression

### The battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri) by Gillo Pontecorvo

Italy, 1965, B/W, 118 min.

Themes: colonialism – torture – terrorism

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Gillo Pontecorvo was born in Pisa in 1919. After making a few short documentaries from 1953 to 1960, this Italian film director made his first real debut in 1957 with *The wide blue road* (*La grande strada azzura*). This was followed by *Kapò* (1959), a film on concentration camps. In 1965, he made *The battle of Algiers*, his strongest film, although his next film, *Queimada!* (also known as *Burn!*, 1969), an epic portrayal of the struggle of the slaves in the West Indies in the 19th century with a remarkable performance by Marlon Brando, is also noteworthy. As can be seen from his choice of subject matter, Gillo Pontecorvo is a “political” film-maker, committed to the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and particularly sensitive to the issues of decolonisation and the self-determination of the Third World. His enthusiastic defence of these causes sometimes leaves little room for critical considerations, but Pontecorvo is skilful in dramatising history and has proved himself to be an interesting narrator.

**The screenplay** was the subject of relentless labour, resulting in four successive versions! Pontecorvo has told how the Algerians, who instigated the project (with, in particular, Yacef Saadi, one of the protagonists in the events narrated in the film and one of its co-producers), could not find a director: “Everyone was worried about having to make an official film. I accepted on condition that I should have a free hand and be able to recount my version of events and not the state’s version. The Algerians had written an outline of the screenplay, and they agreed to tear it up and give me *carte blanche*. Franco Solinas, one of the screenwriters for *Salvatore Giuliano*, and I then wrote and rewrote until we came up with a choral narrative, with a sort of symphonic structure, with no leading role, in order to tell the story, in fact, of the painful birth of a nation ... The struggle is presented as a dramatic moment in the human condition. I wanted to condemn colonial logic, not the momentary behaviour of this or that individual.”<sup>1</sup>

The film therefore recounts, with great care, and as objectively as possible, what has come to be known as the battle of Algiers, the confrontation between the Front de liberation nationale (FLN)<sup>2</sup> networks in the Kasbah and the French

1. Dossier on *La bataille d’Alger*, in *Revue Contreplongée*, Strasbourg, 1987.

2. Ed. note: Algerian nationalist movement of freedom fighters founded in 1954.

paratroopers. The soldiers thought they were the victors in the field, but they had already been vanquished by an entire people's movement towards emancipation.

**Public reaction and the context at the time of release.** The film was made in 1965, only three years after Algeria gained its independence. At its release, it was immediately the centre of controversy. It won the Golden Lion and the International Critics' Award at the Venice Film Festival, but the official French delegation ostentatiously left the hall. Although the film was highly successful in Europe and the United States, winning four prizes in New York and obtaining a distribution contract with an American company, it was banned in France. When its release was finally authorised in June 1970, it was postponed owing to pressure from extreme right-wing organisations, and the film ended up being shown in underground fashion in small cinemas in the Latin Quarter in Paris. It was not to be screened in normal conditions until February 1981!

## **B. Analysis of the film**

**The plot.** The film recounts a central episode in the Algerian war: the dismantling by paratroopers of the FLN networks specialising in direct action in the Kasbah in Algiers in 1957. The opening shots show Ali la Pointe, Mahmoud, a young woman and a child crouched in a hiding place. They fear the arrival of the French paratroopers. This harrowing wait gives way to a long flashback showing how Ali la Pointe, originally a young delinquent, had met political prisoners, members of the FLN, while serving a prison sentence. He is present when one of them is executed. Disgusted, he warms to the cause of national liberation. When he leaves prison, he contacts the networks, which give him a mission to carry out as a test. Through his courage and taste for action, he quickly rises through the ranks of the outlaws.

When the FLN networks take action against the French forces, the counter-attack is immediate. The soldiers move into the Kasbah, thoroughly searching and checking the identity of all its inhabitants. Extremists in the police detonate a bomb in the heart of the Kasbah, killing and wounding a large number of people. An escalation of violence follows: FLN militants, wearing European clothes, take bombs hidden in baskets into the European quarters.

The authorities call in the paratroopers as reinforcements. They are commanded by the elegant Colonel Mathieu, who tries to justify their methods to the press. The paratroopers are not afraid of employing brutality, particularly torture. They consider that all means are justified, since their mission is to win the intelligence war and the fight against subversive elements.

Their action is, in fact, effective. Ali la Pointe and his group are identified and hunted. But the inhabitants of the Kasbah throw their lot in with the Algerian nationalist movement. The political battle is lost.

**Choices and perspective.** Pontecorvo's film, which, with the passing of time, can be studied more serenely, offers critics a number of interesting paradoxes.



This film about the birth of a nation is more lyrical than political or ideological. There is no analysis of the deep-rooted causes of the war and the film is more noteworthy for its dramatic innovations than its expression of an ideology. As a “historical” film, it seeks more to appease than to stir up past traumas. Finally, it is a fiction film constructed in the same manner as a documentary report, close in style to the austere newsreels of the period. The decision to film in black and white further adds to the authentic feel of this “dramatised report”.

**Suggestions for work.** This film is rarely shown on television today and is largely unknown to younger teachers. And yet it offers school audiences a very pertinent portrayal, avoiding oversimplification, of a “dirty colonial war” in all its complexity. The depiction of terrorism, “revolutionary” violence opposed to the violence of an oppressive state and the use of torture by the forces of law and order provide opportunities for discussing violations of human rights perpetrated in the name of ideological logic or reason of state.

Although it is obviously necessary to place the events portrayed in the wider context of the struggles of national liberation movements that brought European colonial domination to an end, not too much time should be spent on the complex episodes of Algeria’s fate. It should rather be used as an example to raise more general questions that are echoed in present-day European concerns.

1. *Does a struggle for national liberation necessarily involve terrorist action?*
  - The film, without oversimplifying matters, sets out the distressing problems of conscience connected with urban terrorism.
  - Blind attack answers blind attack in a dreadful escalation of violence. Such acts are morally reprehensible. Are they an expression of despair? Did colonialism allow for any other way of expressing nationalist demands? What acts of violence does the army perpetrate against the Algerian population? In the end, did the terrorist methods employed not compromise the Algerian people’s struggle? Are the traumatic effects of such methods not still deeply felt today?
  - Although caution must be used, this historic example provides an opportunity for more general discussion with the class.
2. *Concerning torture*
  - Students should begin by identifying all the scenes in the film which show torture. It will be noted that the film opens with the end of an “intensive interrogation” of an FLN militant by paratroopers. What is the purpose of this interrogation? Is the avowed reason, to obtain information, the only one? The paratroopers force their prisoner to put on a uniform. In what way is this a means of humiliating him?
  - The paratroopers arrived in Algiers on 10 January 1957. The “didactic” speech given by Colonel Mathieu setting out the general strategy for fighting the FLN implicitly justifies the use of torture: in order to dismantle the underground networks, information is needed, and the best way of

getting that information is through “intensive interrogation”. This sequence is central to the view of torture, above and beyond purely emotional reactions, that the makers of the film were trying to put forward. They wished to lay bare the mechanism which links colonialism with torture.

- The film’s most dramatic sequence follows the death of Ben Midhi, who “commits suicide” in his prison cell. When questioned about the use of torture by journalists, Colonel Mathieu replies that his instructions contain no such word, but that the real question is, does France want to remain in Algeria or not? If the answer is “yes”, it will have to accept the consequences. This is followed by harrowing scenes of Algerian militants being tortured. Make a critical appraisal of the colonel’s specious argument, comparing it with other situations in Europe in which “the ends” have been said to justify “the means”.
- Analyse the cinematographic portrayal of scenes of physical violence. How does the director manage to avoid accommodating the violence? (Framing, the angles used for the shots and editing effects should be studied and the director’s choices compared with those of certain commercial films in which there is a multitude of unhealthy, sadistic scenes filmed to create a “shock” effect.) What music is used in these torture scenes? What is its significance and what effect does it create?

The “memory” of the Algerian war is still very painful in France and a source of conflict. It is therefore vital that a study of this film there should be supplemented by other accounts of these events, preferably by witnesses on all the sides involved. However, for adolescents in other European countries which are less directly concerned, the issues raised in the film alone provide sufficient material for study and discussion.

## Introduction to The joke and The confession

The denunciation of the authoritarian and police regimes of the “people’s democracies” of the former Soviet bloc has been the subject of numerous films. The aim here is simply to outline the main points of this complex problem. In western countries, in the context of the cold war or the difficult years of peaceful co-existence, a number of films were made with the obvious intention of spreading ideological propaganda. Human rights and fundamental freedoms were reduced to the level of mere weapons. These outrageously oversimplified films, often American, were content to offer simplistic analyses and soothing fine sentiment. Although they now constitute excellent historical documents on their makers’ anti-communist fantasies, they are not included here.

More interesting, and far fewer, are the militant films made in western Europe to denounce the intolerable violations of human rights committed by the states of the eastern half of the continent. One of the best of these films is undoubtedly the Franco-Greek director Costa-Gavras’ adaptation of Arthur London’s horrifying account, *The confession*.

Even more interesting are the daring films made by eastern European directors: Russians, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians and Yugoslavs who, tossed about by the political trials and tribulations of those years – periods of relative liberalism alternating with sudden crackdowns – managed to trick the more or less vigilant censors and, by accepting a few compromises and using a great deal of intelligence, slip through the net of official lies and find, not the easiest task, a distributor in the west and let the world know that the heart of a people and a culture continued to beat strongly even though it was encased in lead and concrete.

From time to time, at a festival or some other cinematographic event, messages of hope arrived from behind the iron curtain. Sometimes they were quickly smothered by bureaucratic repression; sometimes they were misinterpreted or badly received by a western youth that was too sure of its own values or too committed to its own combats. Jancso, Tarkovsky, Wajda, Forman and others were swallows heralding a spring that took a long time coming.

Today, it is essential that these films should be shown when putting together any critical history of Europe, although they are sometimes difficult to understand for teenagers used to effortlessly reading the obvious and simplistic messages with which they are bombarded by commercial films. “Dissident films” are often elliptical, full of allusions and metaphors, and much is implied by what remains unsaid. They contain humour and are detached from the events they recount. And that in itself is always a marvellous lesson in style.

In this educational context, it is proposed to study two films, one made in the west and the other in the east, on violations of human rights in the “socialist” Czechoslovakia of the 1950s and 1960s.



## The joke (Žert) by Jaromil Jireš

Czechoslovakia, 1969, B/W, 80 min.

Themes: denunciation, totalitarian machination, alienation

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Jaromil Jireš was born in Bratislava in 1935. He was accepted at the FAMU, the famous Prague Film School, where he obtained cameraman's and director's diplomas. He belongs to the generation of brilliant young Czech artists who were to breathe new life into intellectual cinema. His originality was apparent right from his first short film, *Sál ztracených kroků* (unofficial English title: *The waiting hall*, 1960). His first feature film, *Krik* (unofficial English title: *The shout*, 1963), was a non-conformist vision of individuals and society in which Jireš used the tide of memories and emotions that overwhelms a young couple on the day their baby is born as a pretext for a subtle study of his contemporaries' passions and repressed feelings. It was one of the films that signalled the arrival of the Czech New Wave.

In 1968, borne along by the openness and liberalisation of the Prague Spring, Jireš made *The joke*, an excellent adaptation of Milan Kundera's anti-establishment novel.

Jireš refused to leave his country after the repression of the Prague Spring. The ensuing bureaucratic normalisation exacted a heavy price from him: suspected of being too insolent and libertarian, he was banned from film direction. His career seemed to be broken, but by dint of his skills, he managed to get a job in television where he made a number of documentaries, in particular on great Czech musicians.

He returned to the cinema at the end of the 1980s, making many successful films, including *The dance master* (*Ucitel tance*, 1995). Today, he is a leading light in the new structures of Czech cinema, which he represents at Eurimages, the European support fund for the co-production of cinematographic works.

**The screenplay and the context in which the film was produced.** In adapting *The joke*, Jaromil Jireš took on a very delicate task. The novel was considered to be one of the major works of literature of the 1960s and its author, Milan Kundera, to be an exceptional figure. Kundera had indeed been a sort of spiritual guide for the whole generation of the Czech New Wave as he had been a

teacher at the Famu. Young film-makers had been struck by his courses on scriptwriting, which focused on how the drama of events could be minimised and the creation of “antiheroes” as opposed to the “exemplary, positive heroes” of the previous generation. Jaromil Jireš and Milan Kundera started writing the screenplay for *The joke* in December 1966, before the novel had even been published in Prague.

The exceptional circumstances of the Prague Spring, those few months of political and cultural openness before the brutal normalisation process that followed the Soviet invasion on 21 August 1968, were of great benefit to Jireš in making his film. Between January and April 1969, in a sort of miraculous parenthesis, the film was screened in Prague, where it was highly successful, before being banned by the film censors for almost 20 years. The censors had truly been caught napping, as the film is clearly a defence of universal humanist values through a critical view of Czech society in the 1950s and 1960s.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** At the beginning of the 1950s, Czechoslovakia is building a socialist society. Ludvik Jahn is a good student at Prague University. He belongs to the “Party” and is preparing for a trouble-free future. He has a caustic and mischievous mind and loves to joke. But politically incorrect humour can turn out to be dangerous, especially for someone surrounded by friends who do not entirely wish him well.

Ludvik Jahn is in love with Marketa, a beautiful young student but a little too prudish and devoted to the construction of socialism. She sends her carefree friend an edifying and enthusiastic letter to convince him of the grandeur of the historical task that lies before them. In reply, Ludvik sends her a postcard on which he makes ironical remarks about the opium of the people and says that he is a Trotskyist. This silly joke to a friend scrawled on the back of a piece of card will turn Ludvik’s world upside-down. He is informed on and accused by an assembly of students chaired by Pavel, his best friend. He is expelled from the Communist Party and thrown out of university for this trifle. His youth is irreparably spoilt.

Fifteen years later, after several years spent in a disciplinary camp, Ludvik is haunted by a desire to take revenge on those who denounced him. This may turn out to be possible, as by chance he meets Helena, a journalist and Pavel’s wife. Ludvik decides to seduce her, but discovers too late that the revenge he hopes for cannot be his.

**Choices and perspective.** In his film, Jaromil Jireš focuses mainly on the central theme of Kundera’s novel, which, in a nutshell, is that the limits of human experience are never so obvious as under a totalitarian regime. It is a major political film in the noble sense of the word. In addition to denouncing the structures which spawn stubborn authoritarianism on the one hand, and submission, ser-

vility and denunciation on the other, Jireš makes a lucid study of the devastation wrought on individual personalities by this system.

He describes two opposite types of people who, to a certain extent, are determined by the socio-historical handicaps of their era, in which lies and hypocrisy are standard practice: Pavel Zemanek, the opportunist careerist who has no memory or conscience and is capable of taking advantage of everything, and the painful inner-self of Ludvik Jahn, a man who is burnt out and bitter with no future, the victim of a system that has outlawed him from society for ideological reasons. The former is too quick to forget his past; the latter drags it behind him like a ball and chain.

### *Suggestions for work*

#### 1. *The totalitarian machine*

- Show how the mechanisms set up in a bureaucratic society and a police state are relentlessly set into motion by a ridiculous incident of no importance.
- Show how the so-called guilty person has to submit to the repression of the authorities, and even worse, to being suspected, denounced and condemned by his own friends and comrades.

#### 2. *Jokes are banned from society*

- How does the director use humour, mostly biting, as a formidable weapon against this society?

#### 3. *The destruction of the individual*

- Are the three heroes, Pavel Zemanek, Ludvik Jahn and Helena, accomplices or victims of the social order? Are they lucid about their society, or about themselves? Would they be different under another political system?
- The second part of the film is even more sinister, more tragic, and more difficult? Why? Is there a message of hope in the film? How?
- How has repression destroyed Ludvik Jahn's personality? What are his plans for revenge and why does he only partly go through with them?





## The confession (L'aveu) by Costa-Gavras

France, 1970, colour, 132 min.

Themes: totalitarianism – torture – destruction of the personality

### A. Background to the film

**The director.** Konstantinos Gavras, born in Greece in 1933, began his career with a number of fine, classically constructed detective films. He then took a new direction by applying the tone and methods of detective films to political investigations. His film *Z*, made in 1969, was enormously successful and was followed by *The confession*, *State of siege (L'Etat de siege)*, 1973) and *Special section (Section spéciale)*, 1975).

**The screenplay** was written by Jorge Semprun and based on an autobiographical account by Arthur London, a Czech politician who had been exiled to France. This former convinced communist had fought against fascism in the international brigades in the Spanish civil war and been among the first to join the anti-Nazi resistance. After the liberation, he became the Czech Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs. But in 1951, he fell victim to the great Stalinist purges and was sentenced after a rigged trial. In 1968, with the breath of fresh air brought by the Prague Spring, he was able to write an account of his ordeal in the regime's jails with the help of his wife (*The confession*, Morrow, New York). In particular, he revealed details of the despicable psychological methods used to break down the accused and force them to make official confessions to imaginary crimes, an essential component of every Stalinist trial.

**The context at the time of release and public reaction to the film.** The main characters were played by two extremely prestigious French actors, Yves Montand and Simone Signoret. In fact, they both felt deeply involved in this denunciation of Stalinism and its methods. It was a means for them to question their former commitments and years of militant action. In the 1950s, they, like many other French artists and intellectuals, had been sympathisers of the French Communist Party. They had been outstanding messengers of the peace movement, taking part in dozens of demonstrations against American imperialism. But graver still, they had often allowed themselves to be manipulated, going as far as to sign a petition against those accused in Prague in 1951. This shows just how much Arthur London's book had challenged their fundamental beliefs. Simone Signoret said that his book raised problems and for many left-wing

people of her generation and that it was a thunderbolt and a terribly distressing blow.

The film was released in France in May 1970, causing great upheaval among the country's intellectuals and politicians. In the words of critic Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, it "revealed the malaise and evolution of the Communist Party confronted with the reality in the people's democracies". The French Communist Party newspaper *L'Humanité* published several hostile articles, accusing the film of playing into the hands of the imperialist adversary!

Elsewhere in Europe, the film brought down the wrath of the press in the socialist countries. The Czech newspaper *Rude Pravo*, the official voice of a country that had been brutally normalised, was particularly scathing in its attacks.

## B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** Prague, 1951: Anton Ludvik, a senior official whose political past is beyond reproach, is brutally kidnapped by the secret police. He is imprisoned in a secret place and not allowed to communicate with anyone. Day after day, night after night, he is subjected to endless interrogation. Despair and physical exhaustion gradually take their toll. He finally does what is asked of him and admits to having committed imaginary "political crimes" that have no foundation in truth. His wife, Lise, after days of worry, is humiliated and harassed. She is called as a witness at her husband's trial. Stupefied by the confessions she hears him make in person, she publicly disavows him. Several years later, in 1956, when the days of Stalinism are over, Ludvik is rehabilitated and reunited with his wife.

**Choices and perspective.** "It is true that I hold respect for human rights dear, but I dislike simplistic labels. I tell stories, emphasising what has not yet been shown ... I take more of a humanist attitude than a political one in the sense that the experience of a human being interests me more than the workings of the state. Or, if you prefer, the state machinery is only the subject of *The confession* insofar as I wanted to show how, when deviated from its proper function, it can crush individual human beings." (Costa-Gavras)<sup>1</sup>

**Suggested work.** Arthur London's book has been published in most European countries. In spite of its importance, its length and huge quantity of historical references make it difficult to use. It would be best to have students read a few pages as background to their analysis of different sequences in the film.

### 1. *How to destroy the individual*

Arthur London relates in his novel how his destruction was brought on by a systematic and methodological plan designed to break his will and demoralise him. He finally fell into the trap that had been prepared for him and confessed. Using

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1. *Télérama*, No. 2375, 19 July 1975.

this idea and after seeing the film, make a list of the techniques used by his torturers to break his resistance down altogether.

- What are the techniques used in the interrogation sessions? Who is the interrogator and how are they carried out? What is the aim?
- Does any physical brutality or direct torture take place? Does this happen often? When do they happen?
- What are the conditions of detention of the prisoner? Living conditions, food, attitude of the guards? How is the prisoner deprived of sensory contact with his surroundings?
- What are, in your opinion, the most effective measures to break an individual's psychological resistance?

## 2. *The ceremony of the confession*

- Analyse the sequence of the trial where Ludvik confesses: how is this pseudo-trial presented? What elements does the director emphasise?
- The contents of the confession: completely imaginary, they have to be believable. How are they stated?
- How does the accused have to explain his crimes?
- Who are the witnesses? How do they behave?
- Describe the attitudes of the “officials” during the trial, such as those of the prosecutor, the judges, the police.
- How and by whom is the defence of the accused ensured?
- What are the reactions of the public attending the trial? How are they presented to the film audience?
- Particular attention should be given to the evolution of Lise's attitude. How is she manipulated? What sinister “role” does her presence play during the plot put in motion by her husband's tormentors?
- Scenes from major Stalinist trials, filmed for propaganda purposes, have been conserved in film archives and have been presented in many assembled documentaries. Scenes from the Moscow trial of 1937 or from the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia in 1951 are available. These should be compared with *The confession*.

**Synoptic work.** Using the above-mentioned questions as background, the end result of the confessions could be discussed. Why did Stalinian totalitarianism not limit itself to just getting rid of its opponents, as is usually the case with dictatorships? Why were these great trial showcases organised?



## A case apart: crimes against humanity

### The Wannsee conference (Wannseekonferenz) by Heinz Schirk

*West Germany/Austria, 1984, colour, 90 min.*

*Themes: racist ideologies – anti-Semitism – programmed extermination – genocide*

*To note: a frame from the film showing Heydrich in front of a map of Europe*

#### A. Background to the film

**The director.** German director Heinz Schirk has worked mainly for television. That he and his producer, Manfred Koritowsky, carried this difficult and demanding project through is greatly to their credit. It should be stressed that the film was a German and Austrian co-production: looking the past in the eye and undertaking to pass on its cruellest lessons is the sign of a democratically mature society.

**The context in which the film was produced.** It should first be pointed out that this film was part of the vast intellectual debate that went on in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s on Germans' responsibility/culpability for the Final Solution. The film bears witness to the determination of certain German intellectuals at the end of the 1980s to make a thorough historical study of the procedures whereby the Final Solution was adopted and implemented.

According to the directors and producers, their aim in making the film was to "compile a file for the future". As a documentary fiction, the film sets itself apart from the many other films that have been made on the Jewish genocide. It is a documentary insofar as it attempts to portray genuine historical documents in images. And it is also a fiction, as it is only a reconstruction with actors, and thus an illusion of reality. Unlike the documentary approach taken in this film, the vast majority of other historical films on these events would appear to be dramatisations.

*The Wannsee conference* also follows in the wake of a wave of documentary-like plays, which, a few years previously, had given German theatre a series of powerful and controversial works of reconstitution, such as *The deputy*, by Rolf Hochhuth (1963), and *The investigation*, by Peter Weiss (1965).

#### B. Analysis of the film

**The plot.** On 20 January 1942, 14 representatives of the SS, the governmental bureaucracy and the army held a meeting in a beautiful villa in Wannsee, a residential suburb of Berlin. The official purpose of this meeting, organised by

Reinhard Heydrich and attended by, among others, SS officers Eichmann and Müller, the sinister Roland Freisler, Minister of Justice, and Stuckart, Secretary of State of the Interior, was to finalise the practical measures for the Final Solution. However, another issue was at stake, one that was of great importance in the quarrels between the various branches of the bureaucratic machinery: Heydrich and the SS wanted the representatives of the various party and state administrations to yield, on their own initiative, authority in their particular fields to the SS.

This cinematographic account faithfully follows the order of proceedings as reconstructed from the shorthand notes taken by Eichmann's secretariat.

**Suggested work.** It is essential that this dense and complex film should be screened in full, following which work could be carried out in three successive stages.

1. *The information given in the film concerning the practical measures for the Final Solution should be noted down in detail. For example, it should be possible to identify:*

- How the Final Solution would spread from west to east.
- The forecast for the number of victims in each country (including Jews in Britain!).
- The fate to be reserved for *Mischlinge*, men and women with one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent (attention should be drawn to how much this item was a subject of disagreement and took up a large part of the meeting), implementation measures, etc.

The information gathered should be studied, commented on and compared with any other documents available on the subject. In addition to the concrete information given, students should carefully study two overall phenomena apparent during the conference.

- The use of language: at which point do they talk freely of gas, wagons and methods of annihilation? In contrast, when do they use euphemisms and insinuations? What is the significance of these different choices of language?
- The relations between the different sections of the bureaucracy: are there any objections to the idea of a Final Solution? Which subjects give rise to the most bitter debates, the greatest annoyance? Is the overall supervision of the SS readily accepted?

2. *The director's choices. How were actors chosen to act out this reconstruction? Above all, how were they directed? They portray historical characters, inevitably giving them human form, a physical appearance, an accent, a way of behaving, gestures, mannerisms, etc. Jokes and smiles punctuate the "technical" discussions.*

What technique was chosen by the director for filming this long sequence behind closed doors, which could have been wearisome?

3. *Determine the film's overall point of view of the historical event it portrays. If the preparatory work has been conducted properly, students will be able to discuss the specific aims of the director and his crew in carrying out this historical reconstruction.*

- Faced with the various threats posed by revisionism, the film shows what goes on in the wings of a mass murder. On the basis of authentic documents, it shows what has never been shown – with good reason – in the images disseminated by totalitarian propaganda: the conditions, including the stupidity and bureaucratic inadequacy, under which “crimes committed on paper” are perpetrated.
- The actors' role is also to give horror faces and names, in other words, put the real question of human responsibilities by showing that the agencies that prepare and carry out state crimes are not mere cogs bound by obedience, but individuals who contribute their zeal and enthusiasm to an undertaking to exterminate a people, employing their professional skills and drawing benefits and advantages from their work. Through ideological depravity, technocratic blindness and careerism, they were the artisans of the Final Solution.





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